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Spanish translation: Nuriyeh McLaren

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Many articles published in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* allude to the institutions and central figures of the Bahá'í Faith; as an aid for those unfamiliar with the Bahá'í Faith, we include here a succinct summary excerpted from <http://www.bahai.org/beliefs/bahaullah-covenant/>. The reader may also find it helpful to visit the official web site for the worldwide Bahá'í community (www.bahai.org) available in several languages. For article submission guidelines, please visit <http://bahai-studies.ca/the-journal-of-bahai-studies-submission-guidelines/>.

ABOUT THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

The Bahá'í Faith, its followers believe, is “divine in origin, all-embracing in scope, broad in its outlook, scientific in its method, humanitarian in its principles and dynamic in the influence it exerts on the hearts and minds of men.” The mission of the Bahá'í Faith is “to proclaim that religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is continuous and progressive, that the Founders of all past religions, though different in the non-essential aspects of their teachings, “abide in the same Tabernacle, soar in the same heaven, are seated upon the same throne, utter the same speech and proclaim the same Faith” (Shoghi Effendi).

The Bahá'í Faith began with the mission entrusted by God to two Divine Messengers—the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Today, the distinctive unity of the Faith They founded stems from explicit instructions given by Bahá'u'lláh that have assured the continuity of guidance following His passing. This line of succession, referred to as the Covenant, went from Bahá'u'lláh to His Son 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and then from 'Abdu'l-Bahá to His grandson, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice, ordained by Bahá'u'lláh. A Bahá'í accepts the divine authority of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh and of these appointed successors.

The Báb (1819-1850) is the Herald of the Bahá'í Faith. In the middle of the 19th century, He announced that He was the bearer of a message destined to transform humanity's spiritual life. His mission was to prepare the way for the coming of a second Messenger from God, greater than Himself, who would usher in an age of peace and justice.

Bahá'u'lláh (1817-1892)—the “Glory of God”—is the Promised One foretold by the Báb and all of the Divine Messengers of the past. Bahá'u'lláh delivered a new Revelation from God to humanity. Thousands of verses, letters and books flowed from His pen. In His Writings, He outlined a framework for the development of a global civilization which takes into account both the spiritual and material dimensions of human life. For this, He endured 40 years of imprisonment, torture and exile.

In His will, Bahá'u'lláh appointed His oldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (1844-1921), as the authorized interpreter of His teachings and Head of the Faith. Throughout the East and West, 'Abdu'l-Bahá became known as an ambassador of peace, an exemplary human being, and the leading exponent of a new Faith.

Appointed Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, His eldest grandson, Shoghi Effendi (1897-1957), spent 36 years systematically nurturing the development, deepening the understanding, and strengthening the unity of the Bahá'í community, as it increasingly grew to reflect the diversity of the entire human race.

The development of the Bahá'í Faith worldwide is today guided by the Universal House of Justice (established in 1963). In His book of laws, Bahá'u'lláh instructed the Universal House of Justice to exert a positive influence on the welfare of humankind, promote education, peace and global prosperity, and safeguard human honor and the position of religion.

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Walking the Tracks

(Saginaw, Michigan, April 1972)

DAVID SMITH

From the Editor's Desk

JOHN S. HATCHER

GOVERNANCE AND THE GOVERNED:
LEADERSHIP, CONFLICT, RESILIENCE,
RESOLUTION, AND HOPE

In the decades since the Second World War, the essential relationship between governance and the governed has undergone several global attitude shifts. That war's utter horror in terms of death and destruction resulted in the emergence of a nearly unanimous resolve to secure our planet against widespread injustice and tyranny. The creation of the United Nations in 1945 held out the hope that global interests and a universal concern for the health, freedom, and wellbeing of humankind would supplant the extreme nationalist fervor that had instigated two worldwide conflagrations.

Of course, the polarization of capitalist versus communist ideologies soon brought about the Cold War, in which the imminent threat of a nuclear holocaust haunted our individual and collective consciousness with every emerging conflict. Nevertheless, globalism seemed to be a universally accepted objective, spurred on by a variety of international alliances, a burgeoning global economy, and the vigorous support of the United Nations, demonstrated, for example, by its assistance of the disenfranchised

populations in developing countries.

For the last decade or two, however, we seem to have pulled back into our shells, on both the individual and the collective level. The gated community has replaced the neighborhood as the American Dream, even as the walled country seems to have replaced the concept of world unity. The humanitarian impulse, so widely touted, has had to confront the reality of putting laudable concepts into action, especially caring for the displaced, the homeless, and the masses migrating from crime, poverty, conflict, and institutional chaos.

When theory is tested in the fire of social reality, the lovely dream of unity and harmony is drowned in the unexpected details of how to bring it about. Thus, the pious wish to house, feed, and care for those who have no resources of their own quickly becomes burdensome and yields to the desire for an orderly and secure life unperturbed by the needs of others.

It is at such a point that discourses about leadership, constructive reflection, and strategic action should become uppermost in our daily lives. If the purpose of governance and leadership is to respond to the needs of the governed, then what attributes and methodologies should characterize the process of those in positions of authority? Where is the balance? What is the standard? What must change if we are to succeed in this human experiment that is our globalizing world?

In this issue of the *Journal*, the diverse array of articles and poems

has been arranged to take the reader on a journey into these paramount concerns and our authors' responses to them. First, in "Constructive Resilience"—an edited transcript of Dr. Firaydoun Javaheri's address at the 42nd Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies—we glimpse how the perseverance of the Bahá'ís in Iran has resulted in the generality of the Iranian people beginning to admire and, in numerous cases, arising to assist the Bahá'ís. Rather than being combative or responding with passive resistance, the Bahá'í community—with the guidance and support of the Universal House of Justice—is choosing to be loving, faithful, and resilient citizens—a distinctive and ultimately transformative response to oppression.

Put them in prison, and they write poems and uplift the spirits of their fellow inmates. Push them out of schools, and they create their own. Deprive them of property, desecrate their cemeteries, and holy places, and still they remain dutiful, reliable, and stalwart neighbors, honest businessmen, while, above all else, refusing to deny allegiance to their Faith or to rebel against the very powers that wish to destroy them.

Preceding Dr. Javaheri's presentation is a poem, "Nine for Peace," about another moving response to government oppression. This lyric, originally written in Welsh, is by award-winning poet Menna Elfyn. In her poem, she commemorates the courage of the "Catonsville Nine"—nine Catholic

activists who, in 1968, took 378 files from the draft board in Catonsville, Maryland, and publicly incinerated them with homemade napalm. Their bold actions were intended to protest the destructive use of napalm by American Forces during the Vietnam War.

The second article is "The Power of Reflection: Advancing Governance and Dispute Resolution Systems through Devolved Reflection and Shared Knowledge Generation" by Dr. Shahla Ali, Professor and Associate Dean at the University of Hong Kong's Faculty of Law. In her paper, she applies research to questions of governance as a means to improve government's function. This fruitful examination of the relationship between government and the governed explores an emerging approach she calls "devolved reflection," a process in which local communities "engage in earnest deliberation to arrive at a greater understanding of existing circumstances, celebrate accomplishments, analyze challenges, learn from experience, and plan next steps." While emulating some of the same steps that characterize the "reflection gathering" employed by Bahá'í communities worldwide for more than a decade, this same process, Ali explains, can be utilized for "progressive advancement within governance and dispute resolution systems" as well as in "cross-border arbitration, or post-disaster governance initiatives."

In a similar vein, the third article by Dr. May Khadem also focuses on innovation in governance, this time among

doctors trying to combat blindness on a global scale. In "Learning about Leadership," Khadem traces her personal journey as she discovers new understandings about sound leadership and its implementation. In particular, her narrative examines "how individual health professionals and institutions struggle to address the health disparities in the world." Detailing how her own approach to leadership evolved as it applies to health services management, Khadem concludes that the ingredients which constitute effective leadership "require a complete change in thinking, orientation, and behavior that includes ourselves."

Not coincidentally, following this article is our second poem, "The Ministry of Happiness," by Nina Israel Zucker. As the epigram for the poem explains, the ironic title plays off the appointment of a Minister of Happiness in the United Arab Emirates whose task is to improve the wellbeing of all people. The poem, however, demonstrates a natural resilience arising as a response to both personal and collective tragedy—something that a government agency is not likely to achieve, especially in a country where human rights are stringently overseen by autocratic governance.

The last article, co-authored by Dr. Abdu'l-Missagh Ghadirian and Shadi Salehian, explores our global response to another sort of conflict—not the external conflict between governments and the governed, but the internal conflict between our desire for rational self-control and our simultaneous

drive for sensual pleasure or affective relief. Examining the present-day war against drugs, this article examines numerous studies on the subject of addiction. Ghadirian and Salehian attempt to answer the question posed by the title—"Is Spirituality Effective in Addiction Recovery and Prevention?" Not only do the statistics they cite from numerous studies seem to demonstrate the efficacy of spiritual practices in both recovery from addiction and preventing it in the first place, but the authors also note how the most widely used and perhaps most successful support program for alcoholism (Alcoholics Anonymous) is based on the fundamental assumption that there is a "Higher Power," a power greater than self. Without acknowledging this power, a person struggling with addiction may well be incapable of finding a sustainable path to recovery.

Finally, we include two pictures from the remarkable body of work by Bahá'í professional photographer, David Smith. In addition, we are most pleased to use for our cover the powerful work of Chicago-based artist, Paula Henderson.

Nine for Peace

MENNA ELFYN

translated from the Welsh by Robert Minhinnick

'Catonsville nine' peace activists including poet-priests
Daniel and Philip Berrigan, May 17th 1968, Maryland

Because if this seems disruptive—
comrades we apologise—
incinerating draft papers
instead of infants
with our home-made napalm
because with Vietnam
such a bloody conflagration
we think it's imperative

Because we shared the Lord's Prayer
quietly before court—
our shackles ensuring silence
no-one should pity us
because we slept that night
dreaming a desert of ashen earth

Because we nine pledged
with heaven on earth our plea
each voice a step closer to peace
because countless went to war
towards sunset without sanctuary
restless and unrecorded
honest folk ripped away from their roots

because men can be vicious
our language teems with violent verbs
but trust the poet
to spoil death's party
using words that challenge war's hardware
and memories of its maiming

Because hellfire we must learn
is more than a missile
but such is its accursedness
that its lesson leaves us no choice

Constructive Resilience¹

FIRAYDOUN JAVAHERI

The purpose of Divine Revelation, asserts Bahá'u'lláh, is “to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself both outwardly and inwardly” (Kitáb-i-Íqán 240). Thus, Revelation has a twofold purpose: the first, to liberate humanity from the darkness of ignorance and guide it to the light of true understanding; the second, to ensure the peace and tranquility of mankind. One without the other will not work. The Universal House of Justice has expounded upon the interconnectedness of this twofold purpose of God. First, individuals recognize the station of Bahá'u'lláh. They then arise to serve the Cause of God and by doing so, their own transformation takes effect as they develop the capacities latent within them. They also develop habits and attitudes that make them able to persevere and be more effective in contributing their share to an ever-advancing civilization.

Bringing together material and spiritual civilization is not an easy job. It is a task that lies beyond the comprehension and ability of any ordinary human being, whether acting alone or

together. Who, then, can do this work and how will Bahá'u'lláh's exalted purpose for humankind be realized? Bahá'u'lláh says that if it be God's pleasure, God Himself could render the Cause victorious through the power of a single divine Word. Should this be His intention, individuals of indomitable strength could appear to achieve victory. However, due to God's loving providence and wisdom, it has been ordained that complete victory can only be achieved through speech and utterance, and by the endeavors of His ordinary servants here on earth. One of the early believers, who was deeply affected by the majesty and power of Bahá'u'lláh, writes that once, when in His presence:

I said to myself: What a pity! If only the kings of the world could recognize Him and arise to serve Him, both the Cause and the believers would be exalted in this day. The following day when we attained His presence, Bahá'u'lláh turned His face to me and addressed the following words to me with infinite charm and loving-kindness. He said “If the kings and rulers of the world had embraced the Faith in this day, you people could never have found an entry into this exalted Court. You could never have had the opportunity to attain Our presence, nor could you ever have acquired the privilege of hearing the words of the Lord of Mankind. Of course, the time will come when the kings

1 Edited transcript of a keynote address at the 42nd Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, Atlanta, Georgia, August 2018.

and rulers of the world will become believers, and the Cause of God will be glorified outwardly. But this will happen after the meek and lowly ones of the earth have won this inestimable bounty." (Taherzadeh, *Revelation* 160)

Bahá'u'lláh, in His emphatic promise of ultimate triumph, also states that God will "provide all the means by which" His purpose "can be established" (*Gleanings* 34:5). What are these means? I will mention a few.

First is the spiritual energy needed to create a renewed civilization. Just as the animating energies of the springtime penetrate the core of all material things and create the conditions for new life, the creative Words of the Manifestations of God influence hearts and souls and revolutionize human society. The irresistible spiritual forces of integration released by the Manifestations break down manmade barriers to progress, and thereby bring forth new potentialities for creating a new race of humanity and establishing a new civilization. The workings of these spiritual energies can be discerned in both integrative and disintegrative processes.

Bahá'u'lláh has also revealed teachings, principles, concepts, and methods that shape the framework for building that divine civilization, which is the integrative process. At the core of His Revelation, He has established His Covenant, a line of succession and spiritual guidance that preserves the unity of the Faith and ultimately of

humanity. The Covenant is a means to protect and advance the process of creating a just and peaceful global society. An inseparable part of His Covenant is His Administrative Order, which provides a pattern of governance that is unfailingly coherent with His purpose: "Indeed, the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh has been and will continue to be the inviolable guarantor of the invincibility of the Cause and its divinely-ordained institutions and the means of the fulfillment of Bahá'u'lláh's Words" (Taherzadeh, *Child* 41).

In addition, Bahá'u'lláh has provided for the continuation of Divine guidance to humanity throughout His Dispensation—an indispensable means by which the fulfillment of His purpose is ensured. To this end, Bahá'u'lláh has given us two divinely-guided Centers of Authority: One is the "Book," which comprises the Writings of the Manifestations of God for this day (the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh) and the interpretations of His two authorized Interpreters (Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi); the other is the Universal House of Justice. This unique institution—which, in a world where human knowledge is mutable and progressive, is invested with the sacred authority to decide on whatever is not in the Book—has also been charged, among other duties, with the responsibility for maintaining the integrity and flexibility of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, managing the affairs of the Faith, and guiding the Bahá'í community.

Divine assistance, Bahá'u'lláh assures us, will also enable human beings

to undertake tasks that would otherwise require superhuman effort and therefore seem impossible to attain. The history of our Faith abounds with stories of victories that can only be attributed to the operation of Divine assistance: from the undaunted courage exhibited by the believers in the earliest days of the Cause in Persia, the land of its birth; to the intrepid spirit of the pioneers from East and West, who spread the Faith's teachings to the farthest corners of the globe; to the exuberant community-building efforts we witness in this very day.

In reviewing the factors ensuring ultimate success, the nature of the Cause of God itself must be examined. Bahá'u'lláh asserts that His Revelation is established upon an unassailable foundation that the storms of human strife are powerless to undermine, and whose structure the fanciful theories of human beings cannot succeed in damaging. We all know these words with which Bahá'u'lláh, referring to Himself, proclaims: "Should they cast Him into a fire kindled on the continent, He will assuredly rear His head in the midmost heart of the ocean... and if they cast Him into a darksome pit, they will find Him seated on earth's loftiest heights" (*Summons* 160). In other words, the DNA of the Cause of God is such that it cannot be destroyed; it cannot be derailed; it cannot be stopped from achieving its objectives.

What, then, should be our attitude, mindset, and approach to our individual and collective services in the path

of civilization-building? The lives of the Twin Manifestations of God for this age, the life of the Center of the Covenant, and of the beloved Guardian, comprise sources of inspiration for us all. The spirit of determination demonstrated by the early believers in both the East and the West are also invaluable in this regard. We witness this spirit in over 5,000 clusters worldwide and the efforts of many individuals and groups of Bahá'ís who are trying to contribute to a more just and united society. Through community-building, we are learning how to translate the teachings of the Faith into reality, a process which requires individual and collective acts of service and sacrifice. A review of the history of the Bahá'í community of Iran where, over the past 175 years, the believers have been subjected to injustice and oppression, can also prove instructive. I will focus on this review, but first we need to dedicate a few words to the nature of opposition to the Faith in that country.

For centuries, the Shi'a mullahs had been struggling to gain power in Iran. Depending on the strength of the central government of the day, they played different roles in running the country and in shaping Iranian culture. Many were also interested in advancing their own personal power and authority. From the rise of the Báb to the present day, the clerical establishment has viewed the Faith as a challenge to essential Shi'a doctrines and to their own interests. As Shoghi Effendi noted about the early days of the Báb's Dispensation: "Fearful,

envious, thoroughly angered, the mullahs were beginning to perceive the seriousness of their position" (*God Passes By* 11) as they foresaw not only the waning of their influence, but also the end of their power. The House of Justice has explained that the clergy recognized in Bahá'u'lláh the Voice of a coming society of justice and enlightenment in which they will have no place, and this is the fundamental reason why they so desperately opposed Bahá'u'lláh (26 November 2003).

As self-proclaimed enemies of the Faith, the mullahs have used not only their pulpits and assumed moral authority over their congregations, but also, whenever they could, the machinery of government to implement their plans to persecute the Bahá'ís. Across various periods of history, they have employed diverse approaches in their efforts against the Bahá'í community. During the rule of the Qajar Dynasty (1794-1925), the clerical establishment had significant influence. It therefore comes as no surprise that in the decades following the proclamation of the Báb (1844), until the overthrow of the Qajar Dynasty in 1925, the mullahs instigated virulent and ongoing attacks on Bahá'ís in cities and villages across the nation. They spread disinformation and distorted the facts of history, playing on an ill-informed population's ingrained prejudices and widespread enslavement to conspiracy theories. They deliberately ignored the Bahá'ís' loyalty to their country and their sincere

efforts to contribute to its advancement and, instead, propagated slander against them.

During the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925-1979), the government purportedly followed a system in accord with secular ideas of freedom of worship, and the Bahá'ís were able to exercise a few of their basic rights. However, as the power struggle between the Shah and the mullahs went on, Bahá'ís were often used as a scapegoat, suffering a great deal of discrimination and injustice.

In 1979, with the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini and his clergy came to power with specific political, social and religious goals. Key among these goals was (and is) systemic opposition to the Bahá'í community. This makes Iran, at present, the only country in the world with a government-sponsored plan against the Faith. So extensive is this plan that it would be difficult, in this short space, to make even a cursory review of all the repressive activities in which the government is engaged. Suffice it to say that the overall aim of the government, as blatantly stated in its official documents, is the eradication of the Bahá'í community in Iran and discrediting of the Bahá'ís outside Iran (Dugal). This aim is being pursued vigorously through a multidimensional plan, notwithstanding, among other things, its high cost to the nation in both material and moral terms.

The first decade of the revolution witnessed hundreds of killings and thousands of arrests within the

Iranian Bahá'í community. Bahá'í institutions were banned. A massive and ever-expanding anti-Bahá'í propaganda machine began demonizing the Bahá'ís, and it continues to this very day, some forty years later. Bahá'í holy places and cemeteries have been destroyed across Iran. Efforts aimed at the economic strangulation of the Bahá'ís were initiated from the outset and still continue. The believers are prevented from teaching or studying in any university or other institution of higher learning in the country. A large amount of wealth belonging to both the Bahá'í community, as well as individual Bahá'ís, has been confiscated.

The manner in which the believers in the Cradle of the Faith have responded to this opposition has been described by the Universal House of Justice as “constructive resilience.” A letter written on its behalf to the friends in Iran praises them for striving to transcend the opposition “with that same constructive resilience that characterized” the actions of the early believers when responding “to the duplicity of their detractors” (9 September 2007).

The term “constructive resilience” was first used by the Universal House of Justice with a specific meaning in mind, and I would like to share with you my personal understanding of that meaning. Before I do so, let me provide a brief caveat. Members of the Bahá'í Faith do not claim to be the first group or community to have responded benignly to injustice or to remain loyal

citizens while suffering at the hands of an oppressive regime. Instead, constructive resilience refers to how the Bahá'ís in Iran have continued to grow community life and stay empowered, even while being deprived of fundamental civil liberties and human rights.

The Iranian Bahá'ís are systematically modeling community-building at the grassroots level, a response demonstrated by Bahá'u'lláh during His exile to Baghdad. Little by little, He guided the believers in exemplifying such kindness and virtuous comportment that they won the hearts of the citizenry, even to the point of gaining the trust of the official representatives of the Ottoman government.

In light of this background, let me begin by first simply defining resilience itself. According to the common understandings of the term, resilience is the capacity to recover from difficulties; elasticity and toughness are often mentioned in this regard. In psychological terms, resilience is the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, or significant sources of stress.

Many among the survivors of injustice, who number in the millions today, demonstrate resilience and achieve positive results. But the response to injustice and oppression also varies considerably among peoples. It ranges from submission and acceptance, to protest, resistance, open confrontation, and, at times, even violence. In some cases, those affected lose confidence in their perception of themselves and their own strength. They

become drained of that spirit of initiative so integral to human nature, and can be reduced to the level of objects and passive victims of their rulers' decree. Indeed, some who are exposed to sustained oppression can become so conditioned that, in their turn, should the opportunity offer itself, they accept the prevailing norms and take actions that are not in harmony with the very reasons for which they were persecuted. If they eventually come to power, these oppressed groups can easily fall into the same behaviors as their former oppressors. And the cycle goes on.

Constructive resilience is different. In the case of the Bahá'ís of Iran, it does not consist of submission or passive and patient acceptance of injustice. Neither does it rely on believing in some mysterious power that—disconnected from their actions—will free them from the chains of oppression. Instead, constructive resilience is an energetic and purposeful response that is coherent with the very aim of the Faith: unity. For the Bahá'ís of Iran, it constitutes a non-adversarial, violence-free, but dynamic approach to creating patterns of social engagement that move away from contention. At the same time, community members are vigorously pursuing every possible legal avenue available to correct and remedy the prevailing injustice.

Acting within the central tenets of the Faith, constructive resilience requires that members of the Faith avoid compromising their beliefs and adherence to the Teachings. They must not

deviate, even slightly, from the essence of the Faith's spirit. It implies that they remain undisturbed by the prevailing chaos in the world but rather that they see in it great opportunities to promote the Divine Teachings, and labor with steadfastness within this disorder, with the aim of growing their spiritual capacity, serving others, and promoting human oneness. Such a spirit of constructive resilience fosters a process through which individuals and communities are preserved from spiritual corrosion. It provides resources that enable the friends to free their hearts from resentment and to act with magnanimity toward those who have taken part in their mistreatment. Promoting constructive resilience certainly does not constitute a criticism or belittlement of those who fight injustice using confrontation and other means. Rather, it is an approach that the Bahá'ís are committed to, inspired by Divine Teachings and having positive and practical results. The spirit of constructive resilience can be discerned in every aspect of the Bahá'í community in Iran.

One such example concerns the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE). Immediately following the 1979 Revolution, the doors of Iran's institutions of higher education were utterly closed to Bahá'í students and professors. Over several years, extensive efforts to explore possible solutions with Muslim officials proved futile. By the late 1980s, it had become obvious that Bahá'ís would not be allowed to enroll in Iranian universities

without denying their faith. Therefore, the community made informal arrangements to use the volunteer services of dismissed Bahá'í professors who would teach Bahá'í youth deprived of university coursework. Individual families offered their homes for classes and laboratories. The Bahá'ís did not seek to publicize this initiative, so as to avoid provoking the authorities. The BIHE was not presented as a “win” over the oppressor nor was it portrayed as retaliation. Rather, it was a thoughtful and quiet act of collective self-empowerment and moral imagination.

The aim of the BIHE was and remains to nurture the intellectual faculties of youth and to prepare them for service to their society. Despite enormous political pressure, the Bahá'ís of Iran took fate into their own hands. Their youth did not accede to being deprived of higher education and the community found resources, knowledge, and space to cultivate their innate gifts. The BIHE has withstood the Iranian government's ongoing efforts to shut it down, and continues to operate under harsh, fearful conditions. It has produced thousands of graduates in a number of fields, some of whom have been able to continue their education in more than ninety accredited universities around the world.

This year marks the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the BIHE and Bahá'ís around the world are proud of what the believers in Iran have achieved. Expressing its joy at the operation of the BIHE, the

House of Justice writes: “Perhaps the most compelling and clear example of your constructive resilience is evident currently in your earnest striving for knowledge, in your commitment to the loftiest values of faith and reason which the Cause inculcates, and in your perseverance in pursuit of higher education.” In that same letter, it attributes this success to the friends being “well aware of [their] mission” (29 January 2014).

In addition to educational repression, the Bahá'ís of Iran have also faced tremendous difficulties as a result of the government's banning of the Bahá'í leadership and community institutions. Some politicians imagined that the imposition of such a ban in 1983 and the imprisonment of the Yárán² in 2008 would cause the believers to lose direction and hope, and that it would eventually cause the general weakening of the Bahá'í community. But the Bahá'ís trusted the Divine Will and held firm to the belief that all that transpires serves the Cause of God, as long as they adhere to Bahá'í principles. The community stood firm and did not allow

² This term refers to seven Bahá'í leaders, six of whom were arrested on 14 May 2008 at their homes in Tehran. The seventh, Mahvash Sabet, was arrested on 5 March 2008 while on a trip to Mashhad. The seven formed the entire membership of the now-disbanded group known as the “Yárán” or “Friends in Iran,” tending to the spiritual and social needs of the 300,000-member Bahá'í community of that country.

apprehension and anxiety to take root, nor tests to perturb their hearts. They realized that the door to attend to their individual and collective affairs is still open through consultation amongst families and in small groups. Relying on the power of divine assistance, they remained engaged in the field of service and managed their affairs with moral rectitude. They carried out their spiritual obligations with steadfastness, devotion, and wisdom, and worked ever harder to maintain a vibrant community life. So exemplary was their response to this persecution that, in 2016, on the occasion of the eighth anniversary of the imprisonment of the Yárán, the House of Justice remarked:

You of course know full well that the purpose of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is to bring about a civilization that is neither of the East nor of the West, a civilization based on coherence between the material and the spiritual needs of humankind. You also know that recognizing Him marks the commencement of a commitment to dedicate one's personal and family life to contributing to the establishment of that civilization. You are well aware that the fulfilment of this goal is facilitated through the activities and the maturation of the three protagonists in the advancement of civilization: the individual, the community, and the institutions. Even as every living and active

organism seeks to maintain its integrity and compensate for the loss of a part, when the darkness of injustice resulted in the closure of the Bahá'í administrative institutions in your land, you—both as a community and as individuals, the other two protagonists—sustained by the creative power of the Covenant, succeeded in compensating for this temporary loss. (12 May 2016)

In an effort to weaken the community, the Iranian government still exerts every effort to create a gap between the believers and the Universal House of Justice. Many stories tell of their failure. Let me share one. First, I must mention that the Bahá'í prisoners, when answering their interrogators, often explain the philosophy behind their actions as a way to prove their innocence. Many of the interrogators apparently become affected by the sincerity and the compelling nature of these explanations.

For instance, one Bahá'í was arrested for having served as a teacher of Bahá'í children's classes and the interrogator began his questioning of the believer harshly. But when he learned the reasons for educating children with spiritual values, he actually asked if and how he could send his own children to these classes. At the same time, there are also those interrogators who try to avoid the challenge altogether. They wish to bypass the inconvenience of convincing their supervisors of the innocence

of Bahá'ís, and ask the detainees not to explain their philosophies during interrogation. On one occasion, one of these interrogators—who did not want to be caught in a philosophical discussion with his Bahá'í prisoner—approached his task in this manner:

“Respond to my questions without any explanation: answer me with a yes or no.” The Bahá'í agreed and the interrogator said: “I have two questions for you. Are you a Bahá'í? And do you obey the instructions of the House of Justice?” The Bahá'í said that the answer to both questions was “no.” The interrogator, who was surprised, asked, “How come?” The Bahá'í answered, “So you want me to explain,” and went on to say, “To be a true Bahá'í is the desire of my heart. All my life I have been striving to be a Bahá'í. I only hope that, by the grace of Bahá'u'lláh, I will succeed. But I do not consider myself worthy of being called a Bahá'í. As for your second question: If I were obeying fully the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, you should have been a Bahá'í by now, as that Body continuously emphasizes the importance of sharing the Message of Bahá'u'lláh as part of our efforts to build a better world.”³

3 This and following examples are my personal recollections from letters that were sent to the Bahá'í World Centre.

Economic strangulation is a third tactic used by the government of Iran as a way to weaken the spirit of the Bahá'í community. It began with thousands of Bahá'í employees being expelled from all government-related offices and entities. Following this complete debarment from government or government-related employment, the authorities turned their attention to the private sector, resorting to various methods aimed at severely limiting the economic activities of Bahá'ís business owners and entrepreneurs.

In recent years, many Bahá'ís have faced a new problem: When they close their shops in observance of a Bahá'í Holy Day, the authorities seal off their businesses and threaten to withdraw their business permits. Efforts locally, nationally, and internationally to bring this economic apartheid to an end have been ongoing since the onset of the Islamic Revolution in 1979. But in facing this persecution with a spirit of constructive resilience, the Bahá'ís, far from resorting to common disruptive responses, creatively find ways to continue earning a livelihood. For example, an automobile mechanic whose shop was sealed because he closed it for a Bahá'í holy day, began repairing his customers' cars at a lower cost on the street in front of his shop. Naturally, his business boomed. A few weeks later, the government unsealed his shop. The Iranian Bahá'í community has always found ways and means of assisting those in need.

A fourth strategy of the Iranian government in its efforts to demoralize

the Bahá'ís is to evoke prejudice and spread slander about them among the masses, hoping to deter Bahá'ís from taking an active role in society. At times, the authorities openly demand that the believers not associate with their Muslim friends and neighbors. Their aim is to exclude Iran's largest non-Muslim religious minority from meaningful social discourse, barring Bahá'ís from promoting the wellbeing of the wider community. Notwithstanding these constraints, the Bahá'ís remain determined to live purposeful lives in their society. In a letter sent to the Bahá'í World Centre, a young Iranian wrote:

I am a 24-year-old student. A few years ago I had a very bad traffic accident. A man who was not involved in the accident brought me to hospital and stayed patiently until I was safely in the hands of medical staff. He then left. I was very impressed with his kindness. Before he left I asked his name so that I could thank him when I left the hospital. He said there was no need to know his name. However, he did say "I am a Bahá'í, and we are all humans and supposed to assist each other." He kissed my face and left and I had no idea who he was. This shook me and I decided to study the Bahá'í Faith. No one was able to give me a book. I went to the internet and found an address. A kind lady from abroad sent me materials and accompanied me for two years. I am now

a Bahá'í and my heart is illumined with the light of Bahá'u'lláh. But I want to be able to say Bahá'í prayers in the company of other believers. Please tell me, what can I do?

A story contained in another letter reports what a cleric shared during one of his sermons:

One day I noted that a certain person (with an Islamic name) who had regularly attended my sermons, was no longer coming. I waited for a few months and there was no sign of him. I asked someone to look for him. This person reported to me as follows: One day I saw the person in the street. He was very different in his outlook. "I called him by the name I knew him. But he said "I am not so and so. I am now so (a modern Iranian name)." I asked him, "What has happened to you?" He replied: "Do you remember the day when you and I in the company of the cleric got stuck on the road outside Tehran because our car had run out of fuel? Do you remember how many people, all supposedly Muslim, we stopped and asked for help and nobody responded? Do you remember that a lady stopped on her own to see if we needed help? Do you remember that she gave us fuel and did not accept any payment for it and at the end she gave us her business card? I followed up with her

and later on learned that she is a Bahá'í. With her kind behavior I was encouraged to investigate her faith and I am a Bahá'í now."

If there is one area of activity that the government wants to see completely stopped, it is the sharing of Bahá'í principles with Muslim people and conducting activities related to the institute process and community-building.⁴ Since the government is aware that Iranian citizens are more eager to learn about the Faith, it tries to counteract this receptiveness by spreading false information about the Bahá'ís and preventing Bahá'ís from openly correcting this misinformation. Likewise, Bahá'ís understand that engaging in collective teaching plans and other activities that are part of Bahá'í community life elsewhere in the world are not appropriate in Iran under the present conditions. Nevertheless, the Bahá'ís in Iran do their best to teach the Faith while taking into account local realities.

Thus, on the one hand, they do not accept being deprived of their individual expression of faith or contributing to the betterment of the world. On the other hand, they do not teach or openly share Bahá'í ideas in public places, at school, or at work. Whatever they do is done with wisdom and consideration

4 The institute process includes activities aimed at assisting interested individuals to enhance their capacities for involvement in community building efforts and participation in constructive discourses of society.

of local culture and conditions. It is largely through their actions and comportment that they defend their Faith against misrepresentation.

An important characteristic of the way the Iranian Bahá'ís are facing all these tests is a certain spirit of contentment and conviction. They painstakingly make ongoing petitions to government institutions at various levels, as well as to individuals of influence in order to end this unjust discrimination against them. Not receiving a favorable solution, they seek assistance for the defense of their rights from their spiritual sisters and brothers, as well as Bahá'í institutions in other countries. Not relying on others to act first, they patiently and creatively continue their efforts to find peaceful solutions at home. Their aim is to live as contributing members of their society, and to fulfill their spiritual obligations. Furthermore, they pursue these paths of service with an exemplary spirit of love for their country and friendship for their compatriots. They see in all of this an opportunity for spiritual growth and the enlightening influence of the Cause of God.

As one demonstration of this unconquerable spirit, a few years into their imprisonment, the Yárán sent a message to the Universal House of Justice. They respectfully asked the Bahá'ís of the world to refrain from praying for the Yárán's release. Why? Because they could see with their own eyes that doors were being opened for the progress of the Faith as a result of their imprisonment. The spirit of

the members of the Yárán at the time of their release, following ten years of harsh and unjust imprisonment, was a testimony to this magnanimity. One of the Yárán, when discharged from prison, said: "I do not remember during these years talking to anyone about animosity, hate, or grudges.... I was never thinking of revenge or fighting anyone or rising up against any group. I was constantly thinking of equipping myself with spiritual power and energy" (Sabet).

There are also stories telling of the spirit of joy that many of the friends try to maintain, even in the harshest conditions in prison. In brief, over the course of the past 175 years of unremitting oppression, the Bahá'ís of Iran have steadily increased their clarity of vision about the mission of Bahá'u'lláh and their role in it. They have retained a confident mastery of their moral purpose. They have learned to nourish an abiding love for their fellow citizens and for the land in which they suffer so greatly. It is, therefore, an immense joy to observe a positive sea change in the attitude of many Iranian people toward the Faith and the Bahá'ís.

The spiritual energies released by so great a number of sacrifices offered in the path of God, as well as the efforts of both Bahá'ís and members of the larger community elsewhere in the world to arise to defend their rights, have no doubt significantly contributed to the realization of these signal accomplishments. The Bahá'ís of Iran often say that they owe this success to

Divine assistance and to their wholehearted obedience to the guidance of the Universal House of Justice.

In this process, the Bahá'ís have further developed a number of capacities: the capacity to hold fervently to one's faith and to maintain certitude in the Manifestation of God for this age; the ability to frame events historically within the processes of integration and disintegration; the wisdom to cultivate a deeper understanding of the vision that Bahá'u'lláh has given to the world of the oneness of humanity and of a just society; and the courage to enact this vision by following an all-encompassing, coherent, and practical Plan, a path through which every individual can contribute to the establishment of that just society. Through hardship, the Bahá'ís of Iran can perceive the bankruptcy of the material world, humbly beseech Him for Divine assistance, place complete reliance on Him and endure difficulties in His path with unfailing and legendary patience. Through a lack of freedom, they have developed the strength to fulfill the daily necessities of life, survive oppression, and exhibit courage in the face of hatred. Their unwavering determination to seek justice with quiet fortitude demonstrates the will and the discipline required to live a purposeful life. Ultimately, the Bahá'ís of Iran have learned to experience the deep joy and comfort that arises from service to others and to God. Are not all of these among the very capacities and abilities that, in our prayers, we beseech God to help us develop?

Moving from the spirit of constructive resilience demonstrated by the Bahá'ís of Iran, let us look at the larger global context. The rest of humanity is also being battered by forces of oppression, whether generated from the depths of religious, racial, and gender-based intolerance, or from the onslaught of rampant materialism. "What 'oppression' is more grievous," Bahá'u'lláh asks, "than that a soul seeking the truth, and wishing to attain unto the knowledge of God, should know not where to go for it and from whom to seek it?" (*Kitáb-i-Íqán* 31).

The fact is that the act of living in a society engulfed in materialistic philosophies and entangled in outmoded traditions and assumptions is not without its own tests for the Bahá'ís. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said that the believers in the West would experience mental tests so as to purify them and enable them to achieve their Divinely-conferred potential as a force for change in the world:

And yet, how often we seem to forget the clear and repeated warnings of our beloved Master, who, in particular during the concluding years of His mission on earth, laid stress on the "severe mental tests" that would inevitably sweep over His loved ones of the West—tests that would purge, purify and prepare them for their noble mission in life. (Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá'í Administration* 50)

No matter where we live, nurturing spiritual capacities, approaches, and habits of thought is necessary to strengthening our own spirit of constructive resilience. As we strive for the betterment of the world, the messages of the House of Justice addressed to the Bahá'ís of Iran over the past few years identify some such capacities. We live at a time when the vision of Bahá'u'lláh challenges many of the assumptions that shape contemporary discourse. In a letter addressed to the Bahá'ís of the World, the Universal House of Justice states:

Today the world is assailed by an array of destructive forces. Materialism, rooted in the West, has now spread to every corner of the planet, breeding, in the name of a strong global economy and human welfare, a culture of consumerism. It skillfully and ingeniously promotes a habit of consumption that seeks to satisfy the vilest and most selfish desires, while encouraging the expenditure of wealth so as to prolong and exacerbate social conflict. How vain and foolish a worldview! And meanwhile, a rising tide of fundamentalism, bringing with it an exceedingly narrow understanding of religion and spirituality, continues to gather strength, threatening to engulf humanity in rigid dogmatism. In its most extreme form, it conditions the resolution of the problems of the world upon the occurrence of events derived

from illogical and superstitious notions. It professes to uphold virtue yet, in practice, perpetuates oppression and greed. Among the deplorable results of the operation of such forces are a deepening confusion on the part of young people everywhere, a sense of hopelessness in the ranks of those who would drive progress, and the emergence of a myriad social maladies. (20 October 2008)

Growing numbers of people grapple with how to advance social change in the face of political disorder and mounting injustice. They wonder how to respond to our global interconnectedness, which demands new approaches that build rather than erode social cohesion. As a result, questioning prevailing assumptions, established paradigms, and common wisdom is, in the sight of many, a necessity. In the same letter, the House of Justice appeals to us to be conscious that the continued strengthening of our community-building efforts will be matched by a further decline in the old world order, and to be on our guard lest the development of capacity in the community not keep pace with the rise in receptivity of a disillusioned humanity. The House of Justice expresses confidence that such developments in the world will cause the believers in every land to reflect on the lamentable condition of the present order, will reinforce in them the conviction that material and spiritual civilization must be advanced together, and will remind Bahá'ís that

it is they who have the responsibility to champion this mighty task.

The experience of Bahá'ís everywhere in the past few decades attests that, with the help of Divine assistance and under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, they are indeed capable of initiating, under any circumstances, a sustainable and expandable framework for social change, and of inviting large numbers of people to contribute to this effort. As part of our constructive resilience, we need to further strengthen ourselves to remain unaffected by the negative forces of society and to avoid the temptation to give into pressures to adopt the prevailing materialistic assumptions.

Guided by the House of Justice, we must develop a deeper understanding of the Bahá'í approach to answer the ills of humanity, firmly adhere to Bahá'í principles, and resist the impulse to defend prevailing ideas that are popular in the wider society only because it seems expedient in the moment. We must further consolidate our capacity to realize that only through sacrificial efforts and collaboration with like-minded people can world chaos and confusion be remedied and rebalanced. Bahá'u'lláh's advice to one of the believers is profoundly relevant in this respect: "Sharp must be thy sight, O Dhabíh, and adamant thy soul and brass-like thy feet, if thou wishest to be unshaken by the assaults of the selfish desires that whisper in men's breasts. This is the firm injunction which the Pen of the Most Great Name hath, by virtue of the Will of

the Ancient King, been moved to reveal” (*Gleanings* 115:13).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá likewise says:

The beloved of the Lord must stand fixed as the mountains, firm as impregnable walls. Unmoved must they remain by even the direst adversities, ungrieved by the worst of disasters. Let them cling to the hem of Almighty God, and put their faith in the Beauty of the Most High; let them lean on the unfailing help that cometh from the Ancient Kingdom, and depend on the care and protection of the generous Lord. . . . Let them rise up to serve their Lord and do all in their power to scatter His breathings of holiness far and wide. Let them be a mighty fortress to defend His Faith, an impregnable citadel for the hosts of the Ancient Beauty. Let them faithfully guard the edifice of the Cause of God from every side; let them become the bright stars of His luminous skies. (*Selections* 10)

And, finally, Shoghi Effendi gives us this insight into how to respond to the confusions of today’s world:

We must expect these things: It is becoming evident that the world is not yet through with its labor, the New Age not yet fully born, real Peace not yet right around the corner. We must have no illusions about how much depends

on us and our success or failure. All humanity is disturbed and suffering and confused; we cannot expect to not be disturbed and not to suffer—but we don’t have to be confused. On the contrary, confidence and assurance, hope and optimism are our prerogative. The successful carrying out of our various Plans is the greatest sign we can give of our faith and inner assurance, and the best way we can help our fellow-men out of their confusion and difficulties (*Unfolding Destiny* 225).

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The Power of Reflection: Advancing Governance and Dispute Resolution Systems through Devolved Reflection and Shared Knowledge Generation

SHAHLA ALI¹

Abstract

The “power of reflection” has been described by Bahá’u’lláh as “the source of crafts, sciences and arts” and an “ideal mine” with the capacity to produce “pearls of wisdom and utterance as will promote the well-being and harmony of all the kindreds of the earth” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 72). This power to reflect as individuals and communities has increasingly been tapped into within institutions of governance as well. This paper begins with an exploration of what may be described as an emerging approach to “devolved reflection” in which local communities engage in earnest deliberation to arrive at a greater understanding of existing cir-

cumstances, celebrate accomplishments, analyze challenges, learn from experience, and plan next steps.

Résumé

La « faculté de réflexion » est décrite par Bahá’u’lláh comme « la source des métiers, des sciences et des arts » et comme une « mine idéale » d’où jailliront « de telles perles de sagesse et d’éloquence qu’elles pourront promouvoir le bien-être et l’harmonie parmi tous les peuples de la terre » (Bahá’u’lláh, *Les Tablettes de Bahá’u’lláh*, 75). Cette faculté de réflexion individuelle et collective a été aussi de plus en plus utilisée au sein des institutions de gouvernance. Le présent article commence par une exploration de ce que l’on pourrait décrire comme une nouvelle approche de « réflexion décentralisée » selon laquelle les communautés locales prennent part à des délibérations sérieuses pour arriver à une meilleure compréhension de leur réalité, célébrer les réalisations, analyser les défis, apprendre de l’expérience et planifier les prochaines étapes.

Resumen

La “facultad de la reflexión” ha sido descrita por Bahá’u’lláh como “el origen de los oficios, las ciencias y las artes” y una “mina ideal” con la capacidad de producir “perlas de sabiduría y prolección que fomenten el bienestar y la armonía de todas las razas de la tierra.” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablas* 72). Esta facultad de reflexionar como individuos y comunidades ha sido cada vez más aprovechado también dentro de las instituciones de gobernanza. Este ensayo comienza con una exploración de lo que podría ser descrito como un enfoque emergente a la “reflexión desarrollada” en la cual comunidades locales participan en deliberaciones serias para llegar a una

1 The author thanks Victor Ali, Matthew Weinberg, and anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and input. Thanks also to the GRF RGC research grant (HK 17604318) for support.

comprensión mayor de circunstancias existentes, celebrar logros, analizar desafíos, aprender de la experiencia, y planificar próximos pasos.

Drawing on insights from Bahá'í practices of community-based reflection gatherings beginning in the 1990s and now held in more than 5,000 localities worldwide, it examines how such devolved reflective approaches contribute to planning processes that take into account increased capacity. At the same time, in recent years, mechanisms for devolved reflection have increasingly been incorporated into emerging modes of organizational practice, soft law principles that inform the emergence of customary international law, analytic and normative frameworks for new governance policy, and applied reflective research methodologies. While such developments represent important advances in modalities of governance, this paper suggests that the significant benefits arising from devolved reflection can be most fully realized when it is carried out as a component of a larger framework of learning through reflective action. As part of a tapestry of study, consultation, action and reflection, “questions can emerge and methods and approaches be adjusted” (Universal House of Justice, letter dated 26 November 2012) by which “collective identity” is created and “collective will” strengthened (Universal House of Justice, letter dated 27 December 2005). According to the Universal House of Justice, the capacity to “act

in the light of reflection” cultivates “an instinctive posture of learning” (Ridván Message 2016) and allows for insights to “gradually accumulate about effective ways to work for the betterment of society” (letter dated 1 October 2017). The paper will draw on research highlighting the role of engaged reflection and shared knowledge generation in facilitating conditions conducive to progressive advancement within governance and dispute resolution systems—whether in the context of community engagement with consumer financial institutions, cross border-arbitration, or post-disaster governance initiatives. The work traces the role of capacity building, cohesion, and collective contribution in knowledge generation.

INTRODUCTION:

DEVOLVED REFLECTION AND ORGANIZATIONAL PROGRESS

The possibility of achieving progress in organizational contexts has been a subject of debate and continued striving. June Manning Thomas expertly observed that while humanity has produced advances in technology, it has not solved the fundamental problems of hunger, poverty, homelessness, war, ecological destruction, and political strife: “organizations at all levels struggle to adapt to the changing world in which they must survive and to carry out the purposes for which they were created” (1). Yet central to this struggle is the recognition that as humans we are “capable of thinking,

planning and envisioning alternative courses of action” (Laszlo 56). The “larger the entity or system involved, the more difficult the process . . . becomes,” yet progress is achievable. (Manning Thomas 3).

The Bahá’í writings link the idea of progress to collective participation: “the realization of justice is dependent upon universal participation and action among all members and agencies of society” (ISGP 10) and even state that mankind’s purpose is “to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 109:2).² Echoing this perspective, recent scholarship has described an important shift in organizational structure toward equipping governance entities to “draw out more human potential” (Laloux 4) through reflective dialogue—a concept that will be elaborated on later in this paper—so as to enable them to address increasingly complex and critical social and environmental challenges (5). Among the defining features of such organizations is an orientation toward structures in which “purpose . . . [is] the guiding principle” (50). Such organizational systems operate on the basis of “peer relationships” and are assisted to advance through joint reflection by asking “the . . . questions that help teams to find their own solutions” (69) while “trust[ing] in the collective intelligence of the system” (85).

Frederic Laloux in his book,

² This purpose, I would argue, can be extended to the organizations and agencies created by humanity.

Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage of Human Consciousness, remarks on this “shift from [a] deficit to [a] strength-based paradigm” (46) through a process of devolved “collective . . . self-reflection” (154), and finds that “among the great number of innovative . . . practices . . . joint reflection” is credited with contributing to significant advances in organizational culture and functioning (154). This reflective process proceeds on the basis of identifying relevant topics within an organization that are “conducive to self reflection” (155). Often, in such settings, “collective insights emerge, as well as decisions and initiatives [to be] carried out” (155), assisting “the whole organization [to] grow[w] its way through one topic after another” (156). At the same time, reflective spaces permit organizations to regularly acknowledge and affirm practices that are working well in order that they may be strengthened (160).

At the planetary level, recent work in Global Experimentalist Governance has focused on articulating the dynamics of “institutionalized processes of participatory and multilevel collective problem solving, in which the problems (and means of addressing them) are framed in an open-ended way, and subjected to periodic revision by various forms of peer review in the light of locally generated knowledge” (de Burca, Keohane, Sabel 2). A key step in the deliberative process is “initial reflection and discussion among stakeholders with a broadly shared

perception of a common problem, resulting in second, the articulation of a framework understanding with open-ended goals” (2).

The significance of devolved reflective process in organizational and governance advancement can be linked to a rich body of scholarship highlighting the role of social capital in supporting cooperative, cohesive, and creative social behavior; enhancing productivity (Putnam 1); and “facilitating collective action for mutual benefit” (Woolcock 27), including improved social welfare, reduced corruption (Putnam 1), and even survival in times of crisis.³ Social capital, understood as a set of norms, values, attitudes, beliefs, and relationships (Valentinov 4), is largely formed through the creation of spaces with in a community that foster changes in thinking, attitudes, and behavior,

3 See David Brooks, in his *New York Times* article “The Neighborhood is the Unit of Change” (18 October 2018), citing a sociological study by Eric Klinenberg showing “how important neighborhood is in determining who survives in a crisis.” The study compared deaths in two Chicago neighborhoods during a heat wave in 1995, finding that “more than six times as many people died in North Lawndale as in South Lawndale, even though the two places [were] demographically comparable.” This was in large part due to South Lawndale having more “social connection,” or what Klinenberg calls “social infrastructure,” including “physical places like libraries where people can gather” and thereby “nurture relationships among people who check in on one another when crises hit.”

and the formation of trust (Putnam 1) built through collective exchange, learning, and action (UNDP; see also World Bank Group, *Understanding*). It is strengthened by consultative processes through which stakeholders continually elaborate a common understanding of collective objectives (World Bank Group, *Understanding*), “articulate their interests [and] mediate their differences . . . in order to promote development for the collective whole” (UNDP).⁴ Inclusivity is an important component of social capital and has been enriched by recent scholarship showing that cluster rather than individualized group membership selection can significantly enhance group diversity in multiple contexts (Brooks and Purdie-Vaughns).

Drawing on insights from “devolved reflection” processes, this paper examines the experience of neighborhood reflection meetings in the Bahá'í community beginning in the 1990s, investigating how such reflective approaches contribute to planning processes that account for capacity developed at the local level. It then explores how the aspiration toward devolved reflective practices is increasingly echoed in three arenas: emerging legal principles and norms of international law, analytic and normative frameworks for new governance policy, and applied reflective research methodologies. It concludes by examining how the benefits of reflection may be effectively realized when carried out in the context of a systematic learning

4 See www.socialcapitalresearch.com.

process consisting of study, consultation, action, and reflection on action.

NEIGHBORHOOD REFLECTION FOR COMMUNITY ADVANCEMENT

The process of neighborhood-based reflection for community development has received growing attention in recent years. David Brooks, in a recent article for the *New York Times*, asks whether “it could be that the neighborhood, not the individual, is the essential unit of social change. If you’re trying to improve lives, maybe you have to think about changing many elements of a single neighborhood, in a systematic way.”

Embracing the view that the individual, community, and institutions all have a vital role in contributing to community development, since the mid-1990s, more than 5,000 spaces for community-based reflection hosted by Bahá’í communities have been opened in diverse neighborhoods worldwide (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2016). In the Bahá’í Faith, the concept of a cluster comes from the notion of community as “a comprehensive unit of civilization composed of individuals, families and institutions that are originators and encouragers of systems, agencies and organizations working together with a common purpose for the welfare of people both within and beyond its own borders” (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 1996). Such communities are composed of “diverse, interacting participants that are achieving unity in an

unremitting quest for spiritual and social progress” (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 1996). Institutions that support such efforts serve as a “medium for the interchange of thought and the coordination of activities” (letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, 11 May 1926). In his book, *Creating a New Mind*, Paul Lample describes such communities as being akin to a living organism, noting that “this understanding offers valuable insight into how [a] community can progress and how its constituent individuals and institutions can foster its development” (94). The characteristic of such organisms include growth, differentiation of activity, and coordination of functions (94-95).

Clusters hold reflection meetings approximately every three months, providing community members a space “to assemble from time to time in order to reach consensus on the current status of their situation, in light of experience and guidance from the institutions, and to determine their immediate steps forward” (Ruhi Institute 55). The stage of “reflection is to not only celebrate . . . accomplishments, but to analyze . . . challenges and learn from both to inform . . . plans for the next cycle” (Universal House of Justice, letter dated 27 December 2005). These gatherings are “increasingly seen as occasions where the community’s efforts, in their entirety, are the subject of earnest and uplifting deliberation” (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2013). Moreover, “careful analysis of experience, through

participatory discussions rather than overly complex and elaborate presentations, serves to maintain unity of vision, sharpen clarity of thought and heighten enthusiasm . . . Plans are made that take into account increased capacity” (Universal House of Justice, letter dated 27 December 2005). As described by Dr. Farzam Arbab, “the sharing of experience is extremely valuable. Reflection on the dynamics of the efforts of others yields insights into the causes of crisis and victory in one’s own endeavors” (14).

Often, cluster reflection gatherings are complemented by meetings for increasingly smaller geographic areas that “generate a stronger feeling of responsibility among those attending” (Universal House of Justice, letter dated 29 December 2015). In particular, “the designation of multiple units within a cluster allows for the creation of new patterns of coordination to serve friends in smaller areas” (ITC 7). Indeed, “when each member of the community seeks to address the well-being of the others, the powers of the community are multiplied . . . in a way that attending to one’s own problems can never achieve” (Lample 112). The focus “is not on delivering charity, which so often debilitates the recipient, but on cultivating the capacity in individuals and their institutions to participate in their own development” (107). Such arrangements, striving to avoid the tendency of groups to close in on themselves, engage an “ever increasing number . . . in thinking about the challenges” facing

a community (Ruhi Institute 53), involving young and old (61), especially women and girls (ITC 8). This inclusivity is motivated by the principle of unity in diversity and the anticipation that “this is the day of union, the day of the ingathering” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 260).

In these neighborhood reflection spaces, consultation involves a number of important interconnected elements, including building unity of thought and embracing diversity, truth seeking, and mutual support. Consultation plays a vital role in “harmonizing points of view, strengthening the bonds of trust and love among the members of a community, fostering systematic action, preserving focus, and attaining maturity of understanding” (Ruhi Institute 1). In this context, “mutual support, commitment to learning, and appreciation of diversity of action are the prevailing norms” (Universal House of Justice, letter dated 9 January 2001). The underlying culture “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” (Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2010). In this learning mode, “unity of thought, based on a common understanding achieved in a posture of humility, generates collective energy [and] invites participation” (Ruhi Institute 40). The value of questions posed and experiences shared is realized to the extent that

they are expressed without “assuming an air of authority” and with attention to “the approaches that were adopted at various stages” (49). The objective is to “analyze but not reduce . . . This is no small task [since] society speaks more and more in slogans” (Universal House of Justice, letter dated 28 December 2010). In building unity of thought, “clearly . . . the views of a few cannot be imposed on the whole, nor is every idea equal and every individual free to pursue a separate agenda. Without unity of thought and action, no forward progress is possible” (Lample 100).

The concept of devolved reflection examined in the next section similarly assumes the value of localized reflection at the most proximate level of community, with the aim of gleaning insights from experience that can be applied to advancing systems of governance through drawing on diverse perspectives.

DEVOLVED REFLECTION AS AN
EMERGING SOFT LAW PRINCIPLE
INFORMING THE DEVELOPMENT OF
CUSTOMARY INTERNATIONAL LAW

Paralleling the growing use of devolved reflection—understood as collective reflection at the level closest to a given issue in organizational governance—such principles have increasingly contributed to the development of customary norms of international law, both in the realms of humanitarian assistance and of local resource use planning.

In the sphere of humanitarian assistance, states are increasingly being required to facilitate the establishment of mechanisms for participation and reflective planning. For instance, the Good Humanitarian Donorship consortium of states emphasizes the need to involve communities in “the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation” of relief activities (Principle 7). In addition, Article 2(c) (ii) of the 2012 Food Assistance Convention stipulates that one of the governing principles in the provision of food assistance is the involvement of communities “in the assessment of their needs and in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation” of the relief activities.⁵

A range of qualitative guidelines and standards are emerging from treaties, resolutions of states, and self-regulatory instruments including the Sphere Charter, which outlines a set of minimum standards in the area of humanitarian assistance. These standards include access to appropriate and safe venues for meetings, balanced representation, understandable language, transparent and effective feedback mechanisms, use of local resources and skills, and engagement with progressive local religious, cultural, and traditional norms (Sphere Project 55). Because resource use

⁵ See also UNOCHA, “Civil-Military Guidelines and Reference for Complex Emergencies” (2008), and ECB, “Impact Measurement and Accountability in Emergencies: The Good Enough Guide” (2007), 34–35.

questions are “inherently infused with value judgments” (Rossi 173, 198) regarding where, how, and with whom such resources should be deployed, the reduction of such questions to a single metric, such as GDP, implies “significant loss to those values” (Foster 459). Guidelines such as the above are emerging to ensure uniform and objective qualitative standards of participation in various stages of relief.

DEVOLVED REFLECTION AS AN
EMERGING FRAMEWORK FOR NEW
GOVERNANCE POLICY AND EVALUATION

Elements of devolved reflection may be traced within the emerging field of new governance scholarship, which examines the dynamics of social coordination based on the logic of co-steering and networks.⁶ Among the normative values identified with new governance are ownership, responsibility, and follow-through by stakeholders, given that solutions are derived from community input (Sabel and Zeitlin; van der Heijden). Deliberation and reflection on the part of diverse participants may yield wiser results (Noveck 85), and collaboration, in many cases, may give rise to higher levels of transparency and accountability (van der Heijden 10).

New governance scholarship has provided a framework for both policy-making and evaluation of policy

⁶ For further discussion, see my earlier article, “Towards Peer Presence in Post-Disaster Governance: An Empirical Study.” Also see Lee.

outcomes. This framework entails the following: expanded participation of and partnership between governments and non-state actors in solving public problems (Lobel; Solomon); a learning-focused orientation (Solomon; Cohen 503); the use of public-private partnership in regulatory reform (Solomon; Cohen 503); the state as a convener, catalyst and coordinator (Dorf and Sabel 267; Solomon; Cohen 503); and the development of problem-solving capabilities (Cohen 503). In addition, recent scholarship has examined the challenges facing new governance, such as ensuring participants have the necessary skills for participation (Cohen) and developing procedural safeguards to ensure full participation (Salamon 1611), especially under conditions of social conflict (Alexander, “Stakeholder Participation” 118) and resource inequality (133). New governance regards opportunities for stakeholder participation and reflection as central to decision-making processes (Alexander). Stakeholders, including organizations (institutions, public agencies, private firms, and NGOs), interact, share responsibility, and together generate policy (Alexander) through town hall forums and shared resource management structures. This collaborative effort between public and private institutions and organizations thus enables states and localities to facilitate participatory processes and once solutions are found, depending on the level and origin of the issue, to monitor implementation (Orly 342).

When effectively facilitated, devolved governance efforts, through town planning meetings and shared resource management structures, enable broad-based contributions to decision-making.⁷ However, when implemented without regard to issues of universal representation and geographic and linguistic access to decision-making forums, the process may

7 In Philippe Nonet and Philip Selznick's *Law and Society in Transition: Toward Responsive Law*, "Responsive Law" is described in relation to both "Repressive Law" (law as servant of repressive power) and "Autonomous Law" (law as differentiated institution capable of taming repression and protecting its own integrity) (14, 63). Repressive Law generally takes little note of affected interests. A "common source of repression is the poverty of resources available to governing elites" (33) in circumstances where "urgent tasks must be met under conditions of adequate power but scarce resources" (36). Autonomous Law can be characterized by the rule of law born when legal institutions acquire enough independent authority to impose standards of restraint on the exercise of governmental power (53). Specialized legal institutions claim qualified supremacy within defined spheres of competence (53). Autonomous law reflects a transition from blanket certification of the source of power to a sustained justification of its use. "Legal institutions purchase procedural autonomy at the price of substantive subordination" (58). The downside is that the application of rules ceases to be informed by a regard for purposes, needs, and consequences.

replicate and possibly exacerbate existing representation problems (Foster 485), simply offering a means of providing input on existing plans rather than originating plans at the community level. New governance faces challenges similar to those in responsive law—which sees law as a "facilitator of response to social needs and aspirations" (Nonet and Selznick 14)⁸—such as subjectivity in rule-making and the danger of getting the moral question wrong by caving into power politics (as advanced through special interests, for example). Likewise, new governance approaches face the potential danger of rendering community resource problems "less visible or subject to scrutiny, because the farther the process is removed from a centralized decision-maker, the less accountability there will be" (Foster 485). Research has suggested that in order to benefit from devolution and decentralization (Alexander, "Reflections" 737–38),

8 Among the challenges noted by Nonet and Selznick include the fact that "responsive law is a precarious ideal whose achievement and desirability are historically contingent and depend especially on the urgencies to be met and the resources that can be tapped" (116). Specifically, there is the danger of subjectivity in rule making and "getting the moral question wrong." The achievement of responsive ideals depends a great deal on the development of "cognitive competence" (xx) (within the judiciary) to consider social conditions, gather relevant information from outside sources in order to search for a solution, rather than arbitrarily lay down a rule.

the necessary conditions for new governance's success should include: (1) the broadest possible degree of stakeholder participation compatible with effective decision making, (2) effective and informed monitoring (Alexander, "Reflections" 740–41; Ali, "Measuring Success" 104), (3) ensuring participants have the necessary skills for participation (Alexander, "Reflections" 740–41), (4) the development of managerial and procedural safeguards (Salmon 1611), and (5) ensuring stakeholder participation under conditions of social conflict and distributional inequalities (Alexander, "Reflections" 740–41). In order to overcome potential barriers to full representation, it is necessary to examine ways in which reflective decision-making processes might be strengthened to address potential disparities, the focus of the final section of this paper (Ali, "Measuring Success" 99–100).

DEVOLVED REFLECTION AS A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND APPROACH TO POLICY REFINEMENT

In an effort to apply reflective processes to research design with the aim of generating insights that might contribute to dispute resolution organizations, a series of approaches to reflective engagement will be examined. These research approaches, drawing on participatory reflection, aim at contributing to a growing body of work supporting the advancement of comparative dispute resolution systems in a transnational context. Insights from

these studies will be explored, including lessons learned as to how local engagement both responds to and shapes global norms in an effort to enhance access to justice. The reflections will draw on insights from four projects highlighting the role of engaged participation and shared knowledge generation in facilitating conditions conducive to advancement within governance systems—whether in the form of community engagement with global consumer financial institutions, cross border-arbitration, or post-disaster governance initiatives. The work traces the role of capacity building, cohesion, and collective contribution to knowledge generation.

In examining the dynamics by which dispute resolution organizations—including consumer financial dispute resolution mechanisms, court-annexed mediation, and cross-border arbitration systems—change and develop, it appears that rather than fundamental or top-down shifts in structure, they often proceed through "iterative revolutions" in both thinking and organization. The idea of iterative revolutions, building on the concept of scientific paradigmatic shifts described by Thomas Kuhn, implies that, over time, organizations develop through experiencing new challenges, asking new questions, and addressing these questions through a collective body of shared knowledge and practice. This is similar to his notion that the evolution of scientific theory does not emerge from the mere accumulation of facts, but rather

from a set of changing intellectual circumstances and possibilities. A core element of this process requires exploring alternatives to “long-held, obvious-seeming assumptions” through asking questions and reflecting on experience (Kuhn 139, 159). In contrast to the traditional scientific model in which a lone scientist engages in paradigm-challenging experiments, this process implies the collective work of groups, organizations, and communities engaged in a joint exploration of knowledge.

ENGAGING IN REFLECTIVE PROCESS
AS SCHOLARS, USERS, AND
PRACTITIONERS: RESEARCH APPROACH

Drawing on experiences over the past fifteen years in conducting research into alternative dispute resolution institutions, this section reflects on efforts to establish reflective spaces amongst practitioners and users of such systems. This effort reflects a growing interest in the use of reflection to advance the performance of existing Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) organizations. For example, emerging opportunities for feedback and self-reflection amongst mediation administrators, aiming to improve overall quality and procedural fairness in mediation, have been examined (Welsh). In addition to policy reflection within court settings, reflective research approaches have been used to advance understanding of how comparative systems of ADR function and advance in diverse contexts.

The following will highlight three approaches to employing a process of devolved reflective engagement: (1) diversifying research participation and collaboration on interview design, (2) exploring relevant principles to guide analysis, and (3) developing greater understanding of the impact of community cohesion on efforts to govern under conditions of crisis. What unites each of these efforts is a concern with the development of comparative reflective spaces to address what has been working well, identify and address challenges, and articulate suggestions for improvement in the context of diverse cultural and social environments. The core impetus for this approach is the notion that “the realization of justice is dependent upon universal participation and action among all members and agencies of society” (ISGP 10). The aim is to create spaces where a growing number of individuals and practitioners can share insights that contribute to the ongoing improvement, refinement and progress of dispute resolution institutions.

Within this reflective approach, interdisciplinary inquiry is employed, which appreciates the role of “values and ideals in the world [as being] central to social understanding” (Krygier xi) and recognizes “the contributions that social inquiry can make to human well-being” (Selznick, *Humanist Science* 17). This form of inquiry is often referred to as a “values-based” approach. The interdisciplinary nature of this approach envisions that

“what we draw upon intellectually match the character and complexity of what we are trying to understand” (Krygier xiii), and it begins with an “identification of the values at stake in particular social processes, practices and institutions; clarification of the nature of these values’ understanding of what endangers them; and exploration of the conditions in which they might thrive” (Krygier xi). By examining what has been working in advanced organizations, it is possible to synthesize “more than a collection of case studies,” finding “patterns and commonalities that point to a coherent new model” (Laloux 4).

In general, this research approach builds upon a mixed methodology that involves a combination of survey work and comparative case studies. Each of the four following sections will examine: (1) the key approaches to reflective engagement employed in the studies, (2) relevant insights, and (3) limitations.

I. DIVERSIFYING RESEARCH PARTICIPATION AND COLLABORATING ON INTERVIEW DESIGN

One study, *Resolving Disputes in the Asia-Pacific Region: International Arbitration and Mediation in East Asia and the West*, sought to examine how diverse cultures approach the resolution of conflict in the context of the integration of global markets.⁹ Building

9 For a full discussion of this study, see my 2010 book, *Resolving Disputes in the Asia-Pacific: International Mediation and*

on the observation that “for none is self-sufficiency any longer possible, inasmuch as political ties unite all peoples and nations, and the bonds of trade and industry . . . are being strengthened every day” (Abdu’l-Bahá, qtd. in Esslemont 250), the project sought to widen the base of survey participants to reflect the growing diversity of the international arbitration community, particularly in the East Asian region, and to engage diverse practitioners in conversations regarding interview design and interpretation.

First, to extend the existing Western-focused research on international arbitration as practiced in Europe and North America, this project sought to provide empirical understanding of the attitudes and perceptions of over 115 arbitrators, judges, lawyers, and members of the rapidly expanding arbitration community in China, Hong Kong, Korea, Japan, Singapore, and Malaysia, alongside counterparts in North America and Europe. The project covered both international commercial arbitration and mediation, providing an empirical analysis of how both types of dispute resolution are conducted in the East Asian context.

Second, the research project focused on participation by those immediately and substantially affected by the potential outcome of the research. Participants were given a voice in framing and reframing the interview questions, in selecting the means of answering the questions defined by the research, and in determining the Arbitration in East Asia and the West.

criteria by which to decide whether a question had been validly answered by reviewing and co-creating the interview questions at the outset of the project (Diessner 11). Likewise, the research drew on the model of “social science as public philosophy,” as described by Robert Bellah et al., which “accepts the canons of critical disciplined research” but at the same time “does not imagine that such research exists in a vacuum or can be ‘value free’” (302). In this light, the research placed special attention on examining the underlying values that inform contemporary processes of dispute resolution in diverse regions. This approach drew on recent insights in the field of socio-legal studies regarding the growing need for legal study to be underpinned by a stronger grasp of how legal frameworks are understood across traditions and cultures (Twining, *Globalization* and “Have Concepts”), while examining underlying values that guide dispute-resolution processes (Nonet and Selznick).

Insights from Reflection

The results of the 115-person survey and 64 follow-up interviews highlight the importance of two major factors at work in the field of international arbitration: global convergence and informed diversity (Slaughter). The major finding of the research was that, due to the relatively flexible nature of the United Nations Model Law on International Commercial Arbitration, which allows countries to gradually

and selectively adopt particular provisions thereof, a relatively high degree of substantive legal uniformity in arbitration rules (global convergence) can coexist with, and be enriched by, procedural variation in settlement processes and techniques (informed diversity) across regions. For example, while eighty states have adopted the Model Law on International Arbitration, producing general consistency in arbitration law, the provisions allow for variation amongst states in the role of the arbitrator and the extent to which the arbitrator may be involved in settlement efforts (Ali, *Resolving Disputes* 1). Based on the norm of “global deliberative equality” and the basic moral precept that “our species is one, and each of the individuals who compose it is entitled to equal moral consideration” (245), regional diversity enhances the range of possible approaches and techniques to be employed in arbitration and enables a more global examination of best practices that draws on a wide range of experiences. Regional distinctions are reflected in varying arbitrator perceptions regarding the arbitrators’ role in settlement, whether settlement is regarded as a goal in arbitration, and the efforts made in the course of arbitration to settle disputes. For example, the survey found a greater openness to exploring settlement options and a greater degree of support for arbitrator-initiated settlement discussions among practitioners working in East Asia. Such diverse experiences are understood as not static but fluid, as a set

of learned institutional and ideological expressions based on shared norms and beliefs about the world (Karlberg).

Based on sixty-four open-ended interviews, practitioners' insights center on what they can do to improve the practice of international arbitration in a cross-cultural context. Such insights include the need for better cross-cultural training of arbitrators, more multi-disciplinary and multi-cultural panels, more bilingual arbitrators, a wider pool of arbitrators from diverse countries, greater transparency in and strengthening of local arbitration tribunals, and, finally, better training of counsel and arbitrators as to the uses and timing of mediation. In addition, nearly all arbitrators interviewed felt that extensive adversarial practices were not advantageous to the parties or to arbitration in general.

Limitations

While the study sought to extend the existing understanding of international arbitration practice in diverse regions by expanding the survey pool to international arbitrators working in East Asia, a key limitation was its bifurcated presentation of perspectives, grouping practitioners into two distinct regions. Such comparative groupings create a false notion of separateness. An effort was made to address this limitation by focusing on arbitrators' "region of practice" rather than "nationality." Yet, any study that involves cross-jurisdictional comparisons inherently involves

categorizations. In an interconnected global community, the findings could have been more fruitfully presented as regional insights rather than as a distillation of comparative statistics.

II. EXPLORING RELEVANT PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE ANALYSIS OF DISPUTE RESOLUTION INSTITUTIONS

To explore guiding principles in the analysis of consumer financial dispute resolution systems, the project *Consumer Financial Dispute Resolution in a Comparative Context* presented comparative research about the development and design of grievance mechanisms in East Asia, North America, and Europe. Situated in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 Financial Crisis, this project sought to examine how governments and self-regulatory organizations design and administer financial dispute resolution mechanisms in the context of increasingly turbulent financial markets.¹⁰ Drawing on insights from a multi-jurisdictional survey, the project examined the emergence of global principles that influence the design of financial dispute resolution models. Using these principles, the project analyzed the performance and application of ombuds and arbitration systems, attending to the objective of enhancing capacities that enable institutions to "respond creatively to challenges . . . [through]

¹⁰ For full discussion of this study, see my 2013 book, *Consumer Financial Dispute Resolution in a Comparative Context: Principles, Systems and Practice*.

... the ability to ... uphold standards of fairness and equity” (BIC 12).

First, the project explored the development of global principles that influence to varying degrees the design of consumer financial dispute resolution systems in diverse societies. Emerging standards—gleaned from the Equator Principles, the Basel Accords, Rule of Law principles, and the UN Millennium Development Goals—included the need for accessible grievance mechanisms, financial dispute prevention through transparent risk disclosure and risk mitigation, impartiality, equity, accountability, and fairness.

Second, the project drew on these selected global principles as a lens for analyzing processes and structures that gave rise to the development of accessible, efficient, and equitable financial ombuds and arbitration systems. In order to glean best practices, it examined comparative institutional dispute resolution structures and results in selected financial centers in East Asia, North America, and Europe. By comparing corresponding financial dispute resolution centers in seven jurisdictions, the research aimed to understand how these jurisdictions addressed consumer complaints through unique structures of financial dispute resolution, including ombuds, arbitration, and multi-tier processes that involved a combination of direct negotiation, mediation, and either ombuds or arbitration mechanisms.

Third, drawing on relevant global principles, a survey was conducted

between Fall 2011 and Summer 2012. With a framework of accessibility, transparency, impartiality, equity, accountability, and fairness, the survey assessed how arbitrators and ombuds viewed the benefits and challenges of particular methods of consumer financial dispute resolution, alongside suggestions for improvement. Nearly 100 survey questionnaires were distributed to practitioners throughout the world. A total of forty-eight arbitrators and ombudspersons from East Asia, North America, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa responded. The participants represented experienced practitioners, members of government regulatory ombuds services, and private arbitration commissions. The majority of those surveyed (forty-four percent) had worked for institutions involved in consumer financial dispute resolution for more than four years.

Insights from Reflection

Key questions raised by the study intersect with scholarship in the law and development field, studies in dispute system design, and work examining the impact of globalisation on international legal practice. These questions include: How can systems of consumer financial dispute resolution be designed in diverse contexts to effectively and fairly administer the resolution of financial disputes? How can such centers draw on emerging global principles of accessibility, efficiency, impartiality and fairness? How

might such centers consequently contribute to the health of the broader economic environment? In particular, socio-legal dispute processing literature has long investigated how appropriate regulations and policies may be developed to limit the effect of the power and knowledge gap of “repeat players,” typically well-resourced institutions, such as commercial banks, that engage in repeat litigation against one-time users, such as consumers, in institutional dispute resolution settings. Previous studies in respect to litigation tend to suggest that “haves” (i.e., large businesses and financially well-endowed organizations) tend to fare better in courts than “have-nots” (Galanter). Therefore, if such disputes are to be effectively addressed, attention to procedural safeguards, aimed at addressing structural inequities due to resource disparities in the design and development of such systems, is necessary.

The survey results showed that practitioners of consumer financial dispute resolution viewed ombuds processes as particularly useful in providing an independent and accessible review service for financial customers. The service also helped to identify areas of systematic risk, including repeated predatory behaviour on the part of banking institutions, such as their lack of adequate risk disclosures that could inform regulatory oversight (Survey 1, July 2011–March 2012). Perhaps as a result of such benefits, the use of ombuds processes has been increasing in recent years. At the same

time, practitioners acknowledged areas for continued improvement, including the need for greater public education (Survey 1), as well as regulatory oversight and quality assurance of ombuds processes (Survey 4, July 2011–March 2012).

Limitations

The project’s global, principle-based perspective was helpful in identifying relevant achievements and gaps in existing practice. At the same time, the small sample size of the survey pool (n=48) limits the generalizability of the findings.

III. UNDERSTANDING THE IMPACTS OF COMMUNITY COHESION ON EFFORTS TO GOVERN UNDER CONDITIONS OF CRISIS

Informed by the view that “justice is dependent upon universal participation and action by all members and agencies of society” (ISGP 10), the project *Governing Disasters: Engaging Local Populations in Humanitarian Relief* examined lessons learned in the realm of local engagement in post-disaster response.

The project analyzed six case studies of post-disaster governance experiences in Haiti, Indonesia, Japan, Myanmar, Thailand, and New Orleans, focusing on how organizations at the international, state, and public/private levels are learning to engage with communities following natural disasters. It also analyzed input from sixty-nine humanitarian aid and disaster

response practitioners from eighteen countries and regions to understand the dynamics, challenges, and lessons learned in a decentralized yet coordinated global process of post-disaster humanitarian assistance.¹¹

Insights from Reflection

The project found that the key to efficacious post-disaster recovery is the centrality given to local actors in the direction and design of relief programs. Where local partnership and knowledge generation is cohesive, meaningful, and inclusive, disaster relief efforts are more targeted, cost-effective, efficient, and timely. Specifically, the principal finding of the survey and follow-up questions was a statistically significant correlation between the level of community engagement and perceived effectiveness of response.¹² In particular, where engagement is robust, relief efforts are perceived to be more effective than in situations where engagement is weak. Global- and country-level cluster organization—based on the concept of “experimentalist governance” (i.e., provision of greater discretion to local actors)—consists of a supervisory authority originating at the global level that oversees state, regional, and local

cluster level teams in a decentralized system. This cluster system helped to overcome tensions between over-centralization on the one hand and lack of oversight on the other.

In particular, surveyed relief aid workers noted that local-based partnerships in planning lead to a number of positive outcomes, including more “effective communication”; “better long-term sustainability”; “ownership in work”; “flexibility”; “partnership”; “trust”; “good relationships with the community”; and a more “culturally accepted” approach. Yet, the study found that very few recovery programs achieve high levels of partnership: only seven percent viewed their relief program as “highly effective.” The majority of survey participants viewed their relief program as “generally or somewhat effective” (sixty-one percent). The challenges cited by relief workers included: integrating diverse viewpoints “with various worldviews and needs”; achieving unity of action and movement “in the same direction”; lack of situational awareness; corruption and unfair distribution of resources; top-down policies and donor priorities; and prejudice and stereotypes. In addition, in some cases, the findings demonstrated a misunderstanding of participation. For example, some respondents saw participation as “convincing the local public and government to [get] involved in the programs” and “getting all partners on board with response,” rather than consulting together on the design and objectives of such

11 For a complete discussion of this study, see my 2016 book, *Governing Disasters: Engaging Local Populations in Humanitarian Relief*.

12 For additional discussion, see my article, “Toward Peer Presence in Post-Disaster Governance: An Empirical Study.”

programs. One respondent noted that often a response is designed in a way that is “not necessarily made to meet the real problems of beneficiaries but . . . rather [to] meet the will and objectives of [the] donor regarding bilateral cooperation” (Ali, *Governing Disaster* 260).

Suggestions for advancing systems of post-disaster governance included: “systematic decentralized decision-making for response”; planning based on “real needs of people on the ground using local human and material resources”; “increased meaningful participation”; “integrated but decentralized approach”; “exchanging lessons learned”; and “engaging local partners with their traditional response skills and knowledge.” In particular, socio-legal scholars of disaster studies have found that access to meaningful decision-making forums amongst local community members remains an important concern, given that “factors of inequality contribute to producing higher rates of vulnerability” in disaster contexts and usually reflect “the profound asymmetry that divides those who decide from those who will be affected by such decisions” (Izzo 71).

In particular, the most advanced examples of collaborative response demonstrated that “when an effort is participatory, in the sense that it seeks to involve the people themselves in the generation and application of knowledge, as all forge together a path of progress, dualities such as ‘outsider-insider’ and ‘knowledgeable-ignorant’

quickly disappear” (Universal House of Justice, letter dated 26 November 2012). Building on an existing base of community cohesion, “a consultative climate is encouraged that permits options to be examined dispassionately and appropriate courses of action selected” (BIC, *Prosperity* 5). For example, the response of the community of Daidanaw, Myanmar, to Cyclone Nargis in 2008 demonstrated how long-term patterns of community consultation enabled it to rapidly and effectively respond to the disaster. The Local Spiritual Assembly of Daidanaw hosted everyone in the village to consult about existing needs and resources, organizing volunteers to draw from reserves to provide food and water to community members and surrounding villages, with priority given to the elderly and children. In consultation with the community, a decision was made to “begin a plan to reconstruct the homes damaged and everyone young and old capable of helping took turns to offer their help, cooking, building, [and] carrying things” (Ali, *Governing Disaster* 221). According to an observer, it was the prompt assistance of the Assembly of Daidanaw that alleviated most of the pain and distress, as it hosted everyone and provided them rice soup and water for two days, preventing even more deaths. Later, the community began to assess damage, and succeeded in re-planting crops after obtaining a modest loan for the purchase of seeds and a tractor that was shared among community members.

Similarly, in Indonesia, following the Indian Ocean Tsunami in 2004, a community-driven development (CDD) strategy, which engaged local communities and built on existing networks, was put in place. Following an initial investment of time and resources to build capacity for group decision-making, the first step involved building institutional and social infrastructure, including local councils, in many cases of nine individuals. “The creation of the community councils . . . involve[d] educating the community about moral leadership and having the council elected on the basis of merit and trustworthiness, which usually result[ed] in the local government elites (who have typically exploited community funds in the past) being generally excluded from the councils” (World Bank, qtd. in Ali, *Governing Disaster* 86). The result was that community members came to see themselves more as partners than customers or recipients in a development process. The community councils facilitated transparency and resource efficiency through comparing a number of reconstruction proposals submitted by village members. Rules “require[d] that any village group submitting a proposal must send a delegation of at least two women and one man to the Kecamatan decision meeting where villagers presente[d] and decide[d] on which proposals w[ould] be funded” (Ali, *Governing Disaster* 86).

In comparison with programs using conventional top-down models of reconstruction, projects adopting a CDD

strategy were completed 18 months ahead of schedule, produced more output, and cost 56 percent less. Overall, the CDD projects have rebuilt 140,000 houses, constructed 2,500 miles of road, and supported 200,000 small and medium businesses (Amsberg).¹³ The occupancy rate of housing built by the CDD project was 97 percent, whereas that of similar houses was only about 82 percent. Other benefits included less duplication of efforts, the use of locally procured materials, and transparency—making CDD projects less prone to corruption.¹⁴

Unity of action amongst stakeholders was critical to the process. As noted by George Soraya, “this model would not have worked in Aceh and Jogjakarta if a member of the communities felt dissatisfied or marginalized in the process. Unity in all aspects of the process was paramount in achieving effectiveness and efficiency of the reconstruction”¹⁵

Limitations

Given the random nature of disasters and multiplicity of players, comprehensive analysis of governance efforts is generally difficult (Drabek and McEntire). In addition, the small

13 Online statement by Joachim von Amsberg, Country Director for Indonesia of the World Bank Group.

14 For complete discussion, see my book, *Governing Disasters: Engaging Local Populations in Humanitarian Relief*.

15 See: <http://blogs.worldbank.org/eastasiapacific/comment/reply/3398>.

sample size (N=69) does not permit generalizable findings. Rather, the purpose of the survey and case studies is to offer insights into how institutional capacities for community participation and engagement might be built.

SUMMARY

The above projects sought to apply a framework of reflective engagement by (1) diversifying research participation and collaboration on interview design, (2) exploring relevant principles to guide analysis, and (3) developing greater understanding of the impact of community cohesion on efforts to govern under conditions of crisis.

Efforts to apply devolved reflective practice in dispute resolution research, alongside emerging international customary law pertaining to community participation and developments in new governance scholarship, echo a common concern with community engagement and deliberation. Such efforts are a useful initial step in applying principles of reflection in research and practice settings. However, reflection isolated from a broader framework of collective study, consultation, and action inhibits meaningful advancement. Experience has shown that significant advances in organizational and governance programs result from reflective practice woven into a wider tapestry of study, consultation, and action, which will be discussed in the final section.

DEVOLVED REFLECTION AND SYSTEMATIC LEARNING

It is useful to consider how reflection interacts with a broader systematic learning framework consisting of consultation, action, and study, in contributing to social progress and advancing the reflective process within organizations, governance institutions, and research practices.

As noted above, several challenges have been identified in the context of devolved governance: the potential of replicating and possibly exacerbating existing representation problems by simply soliciting “input” on existing plans rather than originating them at the community level (Foster 485); the subjectivity of rule-making; the danger of getting the moral question wrong through unregulated decision-making processes’ vulnerability to power politics (as advanced through special interests, for example); and rendering community resource problems “less visible or subject to scrutiny, because the farther the process is removed from a centralized decision-maker, the less accountability there will be” (485). Research has suggested that to succeed devolution and decentralization should include (1) the highest possible degree of stakeholder participation compatible with effective decision-making (Alexander, “Reflections” 740–41),¹⁶ (2) ensuring participants have the necessary skills for participation (Alexander, “Reflections”

16 See my article “Measuring Success in Devolved Collaboration.”

740–41), (3) the development of managerial and procedural safeguards (Salamon 1611), and (4) ensuring stakeholder participation in conditions of adversity and wider social conflict (Alexander, “Reflections” 740–41). Work in global experimentalist governance likewise hypothesizes that all five elements of a governance regime—(1) initial reflection and discussion, (2) articulation of a framework, (3) implementation and adaptation at local levels, (4) feedback from local contexts, and (5) re-evaluation and revision of goals where appropriate—must operate together in order to “constitute a form of governance that fosters a normatively desirable form of deliberative and participatory problem solving” (de Burca, Keohane and Sabel 2).

Reflection alone is insufficient to contribute to social progress since this act, when disengaged from action and study, provides no arena in which to test and revise understanding. Rather, reflection forms one component of a broader framework consisting of (1) studying, reading society, and formulating a vision; (2) consultation; and (3) action and reflection on action, which together contribute to the achievement of social justice and organizational advancement (OSED). For the past twenty or so years, the Bahá’í community has been engaged in a process of capacity-building at the local level to strengthen capabilities for consultation and decision-making, drawing on principles including the equality of women and men, unity in diversity, the independent search for truth, and the

interconnection between individual and collective advancement.

A statement on social action prepared by the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá’í World Centre (OSED) notes that the first stage of “reading society and formulating a vision” involves “understanding . . . the nature and state of society, its challenges, the institutions operating in it, the forces influencing it, and the capacities of its peoples” (OSED 11). This does not necessarily “involve formal studies.” Rather, “conditions need to be understood progressively, both from the perspective of a particular endeavour’s purpose and in the context of a vision of humanity’s collective existence” (11).

In contrast to common notions of participation—as providing input rather than originating plans within the community, and as bifurcating “insiders” and “outsiders”—the process of reading society and formulating a vision “from within . . . seeks to involve the people themselves in the generation and application of knowledge . . . [A]ll forge together a path of progress, [and] dualities such as ‘outsider-insider’ and ‘knowledgeable-ignorant’ quickly disappear” (OSED 11). The concept of insiders and outsiders in many instances continues to be used in global resolutions concerning humanitarian sector participation, as they try determine the identity of individuals qualified as locals (Pouliny). Yet, such concepts often create false barriers between individuals who seek to contribute to the betterment

of a given community. Such individuals, regardless of origin, can “be a source of strength, contributing innovative ideas and local knowledge which, when mobilised and used appropriately, can lead to solutions that can make a fundamental contribution to community life” (Tran et al. 152).

To overcome the danger of getting moral questions wrong through caving in to power politics, in reading society, community members jointly formulate a vision. This vision, according to the OSED’s “Statement on Social Action,” “express[es] a general idea of how goals are to be achieved: the nature of the strategies to be devised, the approaches to be taken, the attitudes to be assumed, and . . . some of the methods to be employed” (11). Such a vision, over time, becomes “more and more precise” and “able to accommodate constantly evolving and ever more complex action” (11).

The second stage, involving consultation amongst members of a community, may be applied in “analysing a specific problem, attaining higher degrees of understanding on a given issue, or exploring possible courses of action” (OSED 12). In each case, “consultation may be seen as collective search for truth” (12). It is understood that “participants in a consultative process see reality from different points of view, and as these views are examined and understood, clarity is achieved” (12). From this perspective, “truth is not a compromise between opposing interest groups. Nor does the desire to exercise power over

one another animate participants in the consultative process. What they seek, rather, is the power of unified thought and action” (12). This principle has direct implications for achieving cohesive community participation and overcoming conditions of social conflict.

Describing the interplay between justice, unity, and consultation, Bahá'u'lláh, writing in the mid-1800s, stated that “no man can attain his true station except through his justice. No power can exist except through unity. No welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation” (qtd. in BIC, *Prosperity* 8). The Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) further observes that “the realization of justice is dependent upon universal participation and action among all members and agencies of society” (10). Consultation has the potential to bestow “greater awareness and transmutf[e] conjecture into certitude” (Bahá'u'lláh, qtd. in Universal House of Justice, *Promise* 12). It is a “cause of awareness and of awakening and a source of good and well-being” (Bahá'u'lláh, qtd. in *Compilation* 93) and a process that makes manifest the “maturity of the gift of understanding” (93). It has been described by the Universal House of Justice “as the means by which agreement is to be reached and a collective course of action defined” (letter dated 24 January 1993). Promoting reflection and participation, the consultative process aims to be “substantive and creative; it must allow the people themselves

access to knowledge and encourage them to apply it” (ISGP 7). At times, consultation might be exploratory, advisory, or decisional in nature (Karlberg, “Media”). The process is not an “end in itself,” but rather a means for “heightening collective consciousness, and fostering unified action” (Razavi, “Bahá’í Participation”). The ISGP has identified capabilities needed for effective participation: to “think systematically in understanding problems and searching for solutions; use methods of decision-making that are non-adversarial and inclusive; [and] contribute to the effective design and management of community projects” (7).

As noted above, consultation is not a process of mobilizing support, pushing an idea, manipulating information to show it in the best light, or adhering to a strict set of procedures. Rather, the outcome of true consultation depends on the spiritual condition of those involved. In particular, members of a consultative group “must take counsel together in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise. This can be attained when every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should any one oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 44:1). Further, members of a consultative group must “proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation

to express their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one’s views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden” (45:1). Finally, the members who are consulting “should behave in the utmost love, harmony and sincerity towards each other” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, qtd. in *Compilation* 96) and be characterized by “purity of motive, radiance of spirit, [and] detachment from all else” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Selections* 43:1). Consultation is described as a “spiritual conference” and “not the mere voicing of personal views” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 72). It should “have for its object the attainment of the light of truth upon questions presented and not furnish a battleground for opposition and self-opinion” (72).

The interrelationship between consultation and reflection ensures that decision-making “benefit[s] from a diversity of perspectives through a consultative process which, understood as the collective investigation of reality, promotes detachment from personal views, gives due importance to valid empirical information, [and] does not raise mere opinion to the status of fact or define truth as the compromise between opposing interest groups” (Universal House of Justice, letter dated 2 March 2013, 4). A key concern is learning “how to maintain such a mode of learning in action, how to ensure that growing numbers participate in the generation and application of relevant knowledge and how to devise

structures for the systemization of an expanding worldwide experience and for the equitable distribution of the lessons learned" (4). In particular, "as effort is made to welcome increasing numbers into thoughtful discussion on the direction of their collective development, decision-making processes become more consultative and participatory . . . [and] leaders are enabled to better analyze specific problems, attain deeper understanding of complex issues, and evaluate courses of action with clarity and impartiality" (BIC, "Rising").

The type of consultation described here requires developing a number of interrelated capacities through concerted efforts on the part of individuals and communities. Changing old habits of debate, conflict, and violence and establishing new principles of initiative, detachment, and collaboration requires patience and a long-term commitment (Ruhi, "Overview"). Capacity-building materials developed by the Ruhi Institute oriented toward community betterment, which incorporate the development of knowledge, attitudes, and skills associated with consultative processes, have been described as exerting a "vital" influence on individual and collective transformation (OSED). Such materials are currently being used in local settings; numerous communities, drawing on capabilities of consultation, selflessness, higher motivation, and creativity and "operat[ing] in a mode of learning—characterized by regular and ongoing reflection on efforts undertaken," have

been able to respond in times of crisis by "tak[ing] meaningful and effective steps to respond and recover" (BIC, "Rising").

An example of a cohesive, resilient community response resulting from an ongoing process of learning in action may be found in the activities of the Tanna, Vanuatu, Bahá'í community following Cyclone Pam in 2015. After most of the homes in the affected region were destroyed, participants in the junior youth empowerment program quickly mobilized to clear the fields of debris, dry out all of the textbooks at the school, and visit homes to assess conditions. Community-based consultation, guided by a common vision from study of a Bahá'í International Community statement on long-term development and energized by daily devotions, resulted in efficient, unified home rebuilding efforts, beginning with those of the elderly and concluding with the school and other community spaces. The spirit of cooperation and service inspired fellow community members to arise to assist in the reconstruction process (Sonjel).

At the level of global reflection and discourse, new approaches to socio-economic development by stakeholders increasingly draw on consultative principles to raise questions "about the salient assumptions . . . of the development process and to identify avenues of research and action in relation to those questions" (Weinberg "Contributions" 191). Such a process recognizes that ethical and social values lie at the heart of individual

and collective ordering (Weinberg, “Contributions”; Heller) and views stakeholders not as “beneficiaries” but rather as active “protagonists of development” (Arbab, “Promoting a Discourse” 213). Exemplifying efforts to apply consultative processes in socio-economic development in online-offline spaces, an initiative in Taiwan, “vTaiwan,” promotes meaningful deliberation among large numbers of participants on matters of social concern. vTaiwan has been used to facilitate conversations on the regulation of a range of social concerns, including offensive online images, ride-sharing services, and financial technology. Its “focused conversation” method consists of collectively defining objectives, crowd-sourcing the development and ordering of the agenda, reflection in a virtual space through sharing input and feedback, interpretation of findings, and decision-making. Stakeholders contribute to the interpretation of data and potential lines of inquiry by reviewing and discussing them through a website, meetings, and hackathons. As of February 2018, twenty-six cases had been discussed through the platform, with eighty percent resulting in concrete policy action (vTaiwan).

Of direct importance in achieving impactful outcomes through collective reflection is the creation of shared meanings and attitudes about social reality, which paves the way for constructive action. This creation requires a process of transforming “habits of thought,” as described by Weinberg,

since “in many ways our minds are involved in constructing the world we find ourselves in. Our perceptions and the concepts we hold determine the social reality we see and create” (“Identity” 74). Shared understandings of concepts such as social equity, human security, power, the common good, or community evolve through “a dynamic process of learning, dialogue, and praxis in which social challenges and solutions are constantly redefined and reassessed . . . By building a broader framework of analysis that encompasses not only material and technical variables but the normative and spiritual dimensions of various social issues, new insights can emerge that enrich dialogues previously locked into narrow conceptual boundaries” (82–83).

Complementing processes of study, reflection, and consultation is the stage of “action and reflection on action,” which involves both systematic action and constant reflection to “ensure that [an activity] continues to serve the aims of the endeavour” (OSD 12). Evaluation, while useful, is not sufficient to serve the requirements of a structured reflection process “through which questions can emerge and methods and approaches . . . [be] adjusted” (12). Beyond evaluation of distinct indicators—which often focuses on measuring narrow technical results, is influenced by governance structures, and exerts a corresponding influence on such structures in their conceptualization of problems (Davis 73–74)—a more critical point of analysis is the

advancement of social, technical, and ethical capacity-building.

The entire learning process, defying the new governance categories of “either ‘top-down’ or ‘bottom-up’” approaches, is characterized by “reciprocity and interconnectedness” (OSD 6–7). For example, as “a group of people working at the grassroots begins to gain experience in social action, the first lessons learned may consist of little more than occasional stories, anecdotes, and personal accounts” (6). However, “over time, patterns tend to emerge which can be documented and carefully analysed” by local administrative institutions that extend beyond “opinion or the mere collection of various experiences” (6). At the same time, such learning processes, to be effective, are connected “to a global process” with structures “at all levels, from the local to the international, to facilitate learning about development” (6). At the international level, “such learning calls for a degree of conceptualization that takes into account the broader processes of global transformation underway and which serves to adjust the overall direction of development activities accordingly” (6). In order to do this, the OSD serves as “a learning entity dedicated to the systematization of a growing worldwide experience” and as a conduit to “disseminate the knowledge thus generated, strengthening structures for this purpose and lending impetus to the process of learning at all levels” (6).

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored “devolved reflection” as a mode of reflective organizational practice, as an emerging legal principle and norm of international law, as an analytic and normative framework for new governance policy, as an applied reflective research methodology, and as a component of a wider tapestry of consultation, action, and study. In exploring the application of this framework, it examined lessons learned from research into how local engagement both responds to and shapes global norms in an effort to enhance access to justice. It drew on insights from work highlighting the roles that engaged participation and shared knowledge generation play in facilitating conditions conducive to dynamic advancement within governance systems—whether in the form of community engagement with consumer financial institutions, cross-border arbitration, or post-disaster governance initiatives. I hope, thus, to have highlighted the relevance of reflective engagement, as well as its potential to contribute to institutional advancement and collective knowledge generation when carried out within a broader systematic context of study, consultation, and action.

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The Ministry of Happiness

April, 1968

NINA ISRAEL ZUCKER

The United Arab Emirates is the first Muslim country to appoint a minister of happiness, and she is charged with policies to ensure the happiness of all people.

The dog escaped into the middle of the road, a car ran her over in front of me,
her legs under the wheels, the doors opening, the cries of the pup, the ambulance

that takes me away with her in my arms, the splints that attach to her mangled legs,
to set the bones in some order that makes sense to the vet, but seems impossible to

me. I am humming, We shall overcome, we shall overcome, because that is what we sang
in 1968 to our teacher, Mrs. Poyer, when she came into our classroom of 32 children,

refugees, escapees, first-generations. How can these splintered bones knit themselves
back to a whole, like yarn left outside on a porch, now the feral cats' toy, inciting or

tamping the urge to hunt. There is no ministry of happiness yet. There is no dog.
I know I went to school with bows in my hair, later a mess of paint and sweat and

wild eyes, and while you made yourself into something beautiful, your feet on the ground,
or barely, we made our teacher cry, by singing and walking together.

Lessons in Leadership

MAY KHADEM

Abstract

As individual health professionals and institutions struggle to address health disparities worldwide, it becomes increasingly apparent that the answers are exceedingly complex and require a complete change in thinking, orientation, and behavior that includes ourselves. This paper is about a personal journey of learning about leadership that reveals widely shared false assumptions that have led many off course in addressing the challenges in the fight against blindness as well as other public health concerns.

Résumé

Au fur et à mesure que les professionnels de la santé et les institutions s'efforcent de remédier aux inégalités en matière de santé dans le monde, il devient de plus en plus clair que les réponses sont extrêmement complexes et exigent un changement radical de nos façons de penser, de nos orientations et de nos comportements. Le présent document décrit un cheminement personnel d'apprentissage du leadership qui dévoile de fausses hypothèses largement répandues qui ont mené bien des gens à faire fausse route en tentant de relever les défis qui se posent dans la lutte contre la cécité.

Resumen

A medida que individuos profesionales de la salud e instituciones luchan por atender disparidades de salud alrededor del mundo, se vuelve cada vez más aparente que

las respuestas son excedentemente más complejas y requieren un cambio completo de pensamiento, orientación y comportamiento que nos incluyen. Este ensayo es sobre un viaje personal de aprendizaje acerca del liderazgo el cual revela suposiciones falsas ampliamente compartidas que han llevado a muchos fuera de rumbo al atender los desafíos en la lucha contra la ceguera.

Despite the trillions of dollars spent on addressing health challenges in the world over the past several decades, the problems of extreme poverty, hunger, disease, and social injustice remain dire. The world has failed to address the well-recognized major global issues of our time—climate change, pollution, economic failure, extreme inequality, homelessness, and violence, among many others.

According to the World Economic Forum's 2015 "Survey on the Global Agenda," a surprising eighty-six percent of respondents perceived a global crisis in *leadership*. The most distrusted were religious leaders, followed by leaders in government, business, and non-governmental agencies (14–16). Even heads of charitable organizations were suspect, with only half of the respondents showing confidence in them. Among the key ingredients identified for successful leadership were morality, prioritization of social justice, empathy, collaboration, courage, a global perspective, long-term planning, and good communication skills (14–16). Ironically, when the World Health Organization (WHO) evaluated its initiative "Health for All

by the Year 2000,”¹ a global plan to provide primary healthcare to all the world’s citizens, the initiative itself was deemed a failure—not because of lack of resources or know-how, but for lack of “moral leadership” (WHO, “Report” 7).

When I started my career as a young ophthalmologist, I was very idealistic. I knew there was a lot of unnecessary blindness in the world, and I wanted to be part of the solution. At the time—in the early 1990s—it was estimated that there were 45 million blind people and another 200 million with low vision (WHO, “Vision 2020” 3). These numbers have not changed significantly over the past few decades (WHO, “Blindness: Vision 2020”). Most visual impairment—almost eighty percent—is avoidable; that is, it is either curable or preventable (WHO, “Blindness and Vision Impairment”).

“What an opportunity,” I thought. I presumed that surely those dedicated to the fight against blindness should be able to address its leading causes worldwide. Since half of blindness was due to cataracts and a simple operation could restore sight, at least this particular cause could be easily treated. The global blindness prevention community had knowledge and skills, and all that was needed was to mobilize these resources. Since most of the people blinded by cataracts lived in poor and middle-income countries, the

1 For more details, please see the World Health Organization’s “Declaration of Alma-Ata.” International Conference on Primary Health Care, 1978.

solution seemed very simple to me—go to these countries, find the blind people, and cure them!

Well, I have since learned that all is not so simple. In fact, responding to such a problem is exceedingly complicated. As it turns out, it is not sufficient that individuals be treated; rather, whole systems must simultaneously be transformed. And to treat problems at a systemic level, one needs unity of vision and purpose. In short, the key to bringing about a solution is leadership. To support this argument, I would like to share my journey of learning about leadership over more than thirty years of work, spanning thirteen projects in ten different countries.

EMBARKING ON A JOURNEY

I started my career working for the International Eye Foundation in a project funded by USAID² in the Caribbean island nation of Grenada, a tiny country less than ten by twenty miles with a population of 100,000. After the United States invaded the country in the mid-1980s, the local infrastructure had to be rebuilt. The project in which I was involved sought to create and make sustainable a national eye care system from the ground up. Almost ninety percent of

2 United States Agency for International Development, an independent agency of the US federal government that is primarily responsible for administering civilian foreign aid and development assistance.

blindness and visual impairment in the world occurs in low and middle-income countries where fewer resources are available, and Grenada was such a country (WHO, “Vision 2020” 3). There, I learned that it is possible to transform an entire healthcare system and make it sustainable. Grenada went from being a country with no modern eye care to one in which comprehensive eye services became available—and are still functioning to this day. At the time, I wasn’t really sure what the essential prerequisites for success were, but the experience changed the course of my life.

When I returned to the United States almost three years later, I joined an ophthalmology practice in Chicago, but my heart was still taken with health development in areas of need. And so, for the next two years, together with some colleagues, I made short visits to the Turks and Caicos Islands and to Guyana to offer services where resources were lacking.

Turks and Caicos was particularly underserved: eye care, and eye surgery in particular, were only available intermittently through the International Eye Foundation (the sponsor of my work in Grenada),³ which would recruit ophthalmologists to travel there for surgery every six months or so. This method of ministering to eye care in Turks and Caicos had been going on for years; the country was totally dependent on foreign charity.

³ Details regarding the work of this foundation can be found on its website: www.iefusa.org.

While the inhabitants accepted it, they understandably resented it. We had never before witnessed such distrust of foreigners, sometimes even manifested as open hostility. It surprised us, but it also forced us to re-examine our assumptions. We learned our first important lesson there.

Lesson 1: Charity is not a long-term solution. It has a role in times of crisis and for disaster relief, but to use it long-term is harmful. It disempowers local resources, creates dependency, and strips people of their dignity.

I have come to believe that in many cases, sustained charity is like giving sugar to a diabetic who is having a hypoglycemic episode. It may be life-saving in the short term, but it exacerbates the illness if continued long-term. When we reflected on our learning with other like-minded colleagues, we realized that we shared many experiences. We tried to imagine what a Bahá’í-inspired effort might look like. How would the approach to health development be different if it were informed by the vision of the oneness of humanity and the imperative of social justice? In 1991, we had the opportunity to make a trip to Albania just after the government had transitioned from a dictatorship that had kept it isolated from the rest of the world for over fifty years. We assembled a group of three physicians in different specialties (a pediatrician, a dermatologist, and an ophthalmologist), together with a teacher, a

nutritionist, and a businessman, and went on a fact-finding mission to Albania, hoping to find opportunities for service where we might experiment with a different model. Meanwhile, one of the colleagues we were consulting with had been a volunteer in Honduras at Hospital Bayan, also a Bahá'í-inspired initiative, and encouraged us to collaborate more closely with that institution. We had also been encouraged by then-member of the Universal House of Justice Dr. David Ruhe to collaborate with the Bahá'í community in Guyana in their efforts to provide health services for the Amerindian population in the Rupununi region of Guyana. As these opportunities developed into projects, the need to formalize our efforts resulted in the founding in 1992 of Health for Humanity, a Bahá'í-inspired health development organization.

We began by applying for grants and undertook efforts to address a variety of health concerns, including the leading causes of blindness. Based on our past experiences and through study of others' learnings,⁴ we appreciated the fact that we had to *focus on building local capacity* rather than creating dependency on charity. The problem was that we really did not know how to go about doing this. We did what most organizations working

4 In particular, we read messages on social and economic development written by the Universal House of Justice in 1983 and 1993, as well as guidance from the Office of Social and Economic Development at the Bahá'í World Centre.

in this space did: a combination of charity and technical assistance. At the time, "capacity-building" was the new buzzword among organizations working in development. It sounded great, but in reality, it was reduced to "technical transfer of knowledge,"—still an improvement over the traditional model, whereby visiting experts would provide all the care.

One of Health for Humanity's initiatives had developed into a ten-year project⁵ to help develop eye services in Albania, which, due to its fifty-year isolation, still had services and institutions pre-dating World War II. Through this project, we got busy providing training by sending volunteers to Albania to offer it locally and by sending the local ophthalmologists abroad for more specialized versions. We equipped six eye centers (Tirana, Vlorë, Peshkopi, Shkodër, Korçë, and Elbasan) so that the entire country would have access to eye care services. We also helped to develop a resident training program at the University Eye Hospital in Tirana.

Throughout the project, we noticed problems: some equipment ended up in places we did not intend, some went missing, and local decision-making favored nepotism and short-term agendas. If we were to bring about meaningful transformation, something was missing. It seemed to us an ethical framework that all could agree to might protect the project from

5 Funded mostly by the Open Society Institute (www.opensocietyfoundations.org), as well as a number of smaller donors.

these problems, but at the time, we did not know how to achieve this. This is when we learned our next important lesson.

Lesson 2: “Capacity-building” is not just technical transfer of knowledge.

Halfway through the project, we came across the work of Dr. Eloy Anello and the training in “moral leadership” he developed at Nur University, which he had founded in rural Bolivia.⁶ The training he had instigated was structured to help participants explore their assumptions about leadership, human nature, and dysfunctional ways of thinking that interfere with meaningful progress. Once participants develop these insights, they are assisted in embracing those particular ethical principles that will become a foundation for their work. We all felt this conceptual framework might help us. Consequently, with the help of Dr. Anello (and of his colleagues),⁷ we began to introduce this training into the Albania Eye Project and into a new project we had just undertaken to combat river blindness in Cameroon.

The participants’ response to this training was very enthusiastic, even quite moving. As a result, we became convinced that this framework for training would be a helpful addition to

our program. Although several projects received this training, we had to face the fact that we did not have an effective way to measure its impact or a means whereby we could incorporate it in a systematic way. Our work in this arena was thus a bit haphazard. We really did not have a deep insight into its transformative power until ten years later, when we did an evaluation of the Albania Eye Project at its termination, reviewing the work at the six eye centers and interviewing doctors, nurses, residents, and patients to understand the changes that had occurred.

The first thing we noticed was that the doctors we had trained had become quite prosperous, with beautiful homes and luxurious lifestyles. Eye services were available throughout the country, and the ophthalmologists were well-trained. Albanians could receive quality eye care at centers accessible to them, and the cataract surgery rate had increased more than twentyfold. Some patients were even coming from nearby Kosovo and Macedonia for treatment. Naturally, we deemed all this to be a propitious result.

But we also learned about another outcome that was, instead, very disturbing. Those receiving this care were the same people who used to get it in nearby countries, such as Greece or Italy. In other words, those who could afford the services were the ones who had access. However, the people who could not afford to pay—the very populace we were most concerned about—were still not receiving care. The problem of avoidable blindness,

⁶ For details, please visit www.nur.edu.

⁷ We are greatly indebted to Charles Howard and John Kepner for their dedicated assistance with this training for the staff in Chicago and for projects in Albania, Cameroon, Mongolia, and Argentina.

while perhaps somewhat less urgent, was still very much a problem!

Then, in the course of interviewing the staff we had worked with, we had a breakthrough. At the end of every interview, we would ask if they wished to share anything we had not specifically asked about. The head nurse told us:

The leadership training changed my life; it was the best part of the project . . . You gave the nurses value. It helped us to appreciate ourselves . . . After that, I changed my style of communication with those under me. They saw a difference in me and they liked it. It changed them too. They work differently now. Since I changed my behavior with my subordinates, they changed their behavior with each other and with the patients. It was a new experience . . . The way we organize our work changed completely . . . We never used to prepare the patients for surgery. We never said anything to them. We talk to patients now. We explain everything and answer their questions. We have a new relationship with each other and with the patients. Even the doctors are happier. We have a new vision now . . . and it is growing as we learn more . . .
(Health for Humanity)

He told us he had provided the moral leadership training for his staff and he even took the initiative of arranging

its incorporation into the nursing school curriculum.

We were so excited to learn about the training's impact that we re-interviewed the attending doctors and residents. One former resident told us:

The training completely changed the way we worked. Before, we didn't even know each other's names and everyone was competitive and private with information. After, we saw that it is better for us to help each other and to share information. We were much happier after and learned more.
(Health for Humanity)

However, a senior doctor summed up the sentiments of his colleagues by saying, "It was like a good movie. It was great at the time, but when it was over, it was over" (Health for Humanity). Since the nurses, the ones with the least agency in the healthcare hierarchy, were most impacted by the training, and the senior doctors the least, we concluded that the impact was inversely proportional to the degree of agency people had. The residents felt the impact, though to a lesser degree than the nurses. The senior doctors only recalled a pleasant memory, but it did not change their behavior.

What we had witnessed seemed to be a powerful way to mobilize the talents of the entire workforce. We came to believe that if this kind of training were intimately woven into all aspects of medical and surgical training, it could help create a shared

ethical/moral framework that all would be more likely to honor. Clearly, without such a framework to guide decision-making, healthcare workers' technical skills and knowledge would not necessarily benefit their community. In some instances, they might even cause harm if used for personal gain at the expense of patients' welfare. And so it was that we encountered the next lesson in this organic process of learning about building capacity.

Lesson 3: True capacity-building has an indispensable spiritual dimension.

Throughout this period, Health for Humanity was collaborating with WHO and with the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness (IAPB)⁸ and sharing learning with other non-governmental organizations working in this area. We met annually and reviewed progress toward the goal of an initiative called "Vision 2020: The Right to Sight," a global plan for the elimination of avoidable blindness by the year 2020.⁹

We were curious about the experience of other organizations, so we sent out a survey to the institutional members of IAPB. At the time, IAPB had ninety-four institutional members, eighty of which were non-governmental organizations, including our own

⁸ A multilateral organization that collaborates with WHO to oversee and coordinate efforts to eliminate avoidable blindness.

⁹ <https://www.who.int/blindness/partnerships/vision2020/en/>.

Health for Humanity. The survey was sent out to 147 individuals. Of these, sixty-one responded, a 41% return. The survey results showed that of the total respondents, 93% felt that moral values were essential to their success; 83% said effective leadership is a significant challenge for them; 66% stated that technical training failed to deliver the desired results; 54% were having significant problems with honesty and trustworthiness; and 32% said their projects were struggling or not effective at all. Almost *all* stated that some equipment or funds were diverted to unintended uses in their projects. When asked to rate the ingredients for success, 74% *rated moral values and ethical behavior as the most important* and surgical skill and academic knowledge as the least important! When asked to prioritize ingredients for success, the top three were strong core values, service orientation, and honesty. These respondents were the global leaders in their field and, to our amazement, they were forthrightly acknowledging that *moral values are indispensable to success* in addressing public health challenges!

Clearly, what we were experiencing was shared among other organizations working in health development, and very likely was common in international development in general. When we shared the survey results with the IAPB member institutions, we were invited to offer the leadership training to these organizations at the agency's next quadrennial General Assembly, in Argentina in 2008. The anecdotal stories we heard, together with the

survey results and the unexpected interest from member organizations and from multilateral agencies, convinced us that there is a great need for this kind of training. We now had the objective evidence.

Lesson 4: There is growing consensus among leaders in health development that without the moral/ethical dimension, development efforts will not succeed.

Meanwhile, just as the Albania project ended, Health for Humanity received funding to carry out a more modest project to train cataract surgeons in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. We were increasingly convinced that values-based training had to be intimately integrated into the project so we tried to weave it into all activities. We used the materials developed by Dr. Anello and translated the manual into Mongolian.

At the time, Mongolia's healthcare system had a deeply entrenched authoritarian style of leadership. One person made all the decisions, and everyone else deferred. Nevertheless, we were able to convince the director of the eye department that the training would be helpful to everyone, including her. She gave her blessing and even participated, but it was not easy for her.

After decades—maybe even centuries—of passivity when it came to expressing individual opinions or problem-solving, it was very hard to engage the doctors, and very hard for the boss to share authority. The

resistance we felt made us question whether change, let alone transformation, was even possible. However, we reminded ourselves that it was a process, perhaps slow in the beginning, but gradually transformative as people found their voice and began to claim their agency.

We saw evidence of this change two years later when one of the doctors from Mongolia shared the following comments in her presentation at the 2008 IAPB General Assembly:

This training was totally different from others, as we had had only technical assistance from different NGOs. We always talked about academic knowledge [and] clinical and surgical training, but the importance of changing attitudes and behaviors in order to achieve something had not been considered. So, the training made many people think about who we are, what we are doing, and where we want to be . . . I think the most important impact of the training was that people started to express their views. Before, it was rare to hear anyone share what they truly felt in the larger group. There was a fear to talk about the real situation. But after the training, we felt like we got new eyes to see things around us. Now at the different meetings, those who participated in the trainings are not afraid to express how they really feel . . . Now, we make decisions through consultation within the group

and try to include all the doctors . . . After the second training, ten ophthalmologists from different hospitals in Ulaanbaatar decided to meet regularly to solve problems and make decisions . . .

We were thrilled. They had learned about consultation! This one capacity was by far the most vital tool for learning and problem-solving. Now they were unstoppable, and we had learned another lesson regarding the training program.

Lesson 5: Consultation is the most powerful means for continuous learning and improvement.

Our greatest confirmation about the power of consultation in this organic process came from Mongolia's State Secretary for Health, Byambaagiin Batsereedene. "I remember how bad the conditions used to be, and now the eye department is a modern department with high quality services," she said. "However, it is not just the technical improvement that is noticeable," she continued. "There is something else I have not seen before. The doctors treat the patients differently . . . The ophthalmologists . . . changed . . . They have a very good relationship with the patients and with each other and have now become a model department, not only for the hospital, but for all of Mongolia. I want to see this spread."

There was no longer any doubt. If we wanted to have a lasting impact, we had to incorporate this kind of

training in our development efforts. However, we were still experimenting. We had not yet standardized the training. But we had learned that a spiritual framework, when combined with the capacity for consultation, becomes a powerful force for change and transformation.

Lesson 6: The outcome of a spiritual framework applied through consultation is measurable systemic transformation.

When work is informed by spiritual principles and learning is applied through consultation, the resulting change is apparent in both *quantifiable* material outcomes and in *qualitative* transformation of relationships. The resulting ripple effects can be far-reaching.

As the Mongolia project was winding down, we were recruited to assist with leadership training for WHO's Good Governance for Medicines Programme, an initiative to fight corruption in the pharmaceutical sector.¹⁰ Dr. Anello was already involved in this project, and the invitation gave me the opportunity to work more closely with him over the next year and a half. We collaborated on rewriting and expanding the training manual he had developed. We worked together to develop training materials first for representatives of Ministries of Health from

¹⁰ An interesting overview of this program can be found at www.who.int/healthsystems/topics/financing/healthreport/25GGM.pdf.

the Eastern Mediterranean region convening in Jordan, and later for representatives from all over the world convening in Geneva.

During this period, Dr. Anello expressed the desire to expand on the work we had been doing and to collaborate with me and with author Juanita (Joan) Hernandez on publishing his book in English. Unfortunately, his health did not permit it at the time, but *Transformative Leadership: Developing the Hidden Dimension* was published some five years later, in 2014. A companion workbook *Transformative Leadership: Mastering the Hidden Dimension*, was published in 2017. The book has also been translated into and published in Chinese.

In 2010, my family had the privilege of moving to China—a country with the greatest burden of blindness in the world. While modern eye care is available in the big cities, it is almost nonexistent in the rural areas. We formed another NGO in China called “Vision in Practice” (or “Aikai” in Chinese).¹¹ Under the auspices of this organization, we were fortunate to obtain the assistance of a hospital

11 Vision in Practice was founded in 2011 in partnership with Jeff Parker, an American journalist who co-founded a journal for ophthalmologists in China called *Ophthalmology World Report*. Through his work, he had become familiar with the Aravind model and had already started to help Chinese ophthalmologists obtain surgical training there. Together, we were able to expand these training opportunities.

that has set the global standard for high-quality affordable eye care, Aravind Eye Hospital in India.¹²

Aravind sees more patients, does more surgery, and trains more ophthalmologists than any other hospital in the world. All patients receive state-of-the-art eye care, regardless of their ability to pay. Most of the care is either entirely free or subsidized. Even so, the hospital has a very solid profit margin. Harvard Business School spread the hospital’s fame through a case study it published in 1993 (Rangan). Since then, numerous articles have been written about the miracle of Aravind—a hospital that has been instrumental in dramatically reducing the prevalence of blindness in India.

I had the privilege of spending a month there in order to learn how the hospital achieves these amazing outcomes, and I was pleased to see that the magic is not just the efficiency and standardization that so many focus on in their reports about the institution. There is something else crucial going on.

When a patient enters the hospital, regardless of who that patient is or how the patient is dressed, he or she is greeted with a deferential bow and accompanied to receive care. On every floor of the hospital there are signs with quotations from the founder, Dr. Venkataswamy, about service: “Work is worship”; “I pray to be a better instrument, a receptacle for the divine force”; “When we take care of our patients,

12 For details, please visit www.aravind.org/.

it is ourselves we are helping. It is ourselves we are healing”; “If work is approached from a spiritual perspective, then it becomes divine work”; and many similar axioms. On every floor there is a prayer room, and arching over the door are symbols of all the world religions. In other words, the hospital has managed to institutionalize a spiritual framework, and, what is more important, they have provided ample evidence that it works.

Partnering with this amazing institution was a great opportunity. With Aravind’s help, we were able to send some eighty Chinese ophthalmologists for surgical training in India. We helped six hospitals to be mentored by Aravind, and we worked intensively with two of them to transform their services.

A good example of ‘our efforts’ impact on an individual level was demonstrated by one of our associates who worked closely with us on the eye projects in China. After our work together ended, she started working for a financial institution. She told us that her job was very stressful and pressured her to compromise her principles. When she refused to do this, she was isolated and even mocked. Those around her were enjoying all kinds of “perks” while she stayed on the sidelines, just carrying out her responsibilities. However, within a year, her entire team was fired and the department restructured because of its questionable practices. She was one of only two people who survived the upheaval. She told us, “Being honest was easy at

first, but when everyone else was compromising and putting pressure on me, it was stressful. But I remembered our training and the importance of values. I knew what I had to do.”

An example of the effect of utilizing the tool of consultation in conjunction with the virtue of humility and cooperation at the institutional level can be found in one of the rural hospitals we worked with to raise the standard of eye care which required a painful process of putting the patient’s needs first by re-examining assumptions about the doctor-patient relationship. Raising the capacity of all the staff members meant that a spirit of collaboration and mutual aid had to replace the competitive environment. These were difficult changes. However, within two years, a surgical training center was established, all patients began receiving comprehensive eye services—including surgery if needed—regardless of their ability to pay, and the surgical volume more than doubled. The staff told us that they now have guidelines to help them with difficult decisions. They have changed many of their policies that were oppressive or self-serving, such as arbitrary rules unrelated to patient care, accepting gifts for favors, prioritizing wealthy patients, and the like. The chief surgeon told us:

We see things so differently now. When we live by the moral values, we feel more confident. As a result of the training, we feel the strength to overcome any kind of problem. We learned how to work as real doctors, how to

create a team that is service-aimed, how to encourage each other to keep learning and believe in ourselves. When we improve, it makes us happy. Even when it's difficult, we can make wiser choices than before. (Personal Correspondence)

Lesson 7: True leadership is servitude.

So far, we have talked about lessons learned about leadership, but not much about the substance of the training. The training we employ is inspired by the Bahá'í teachings. The term "leadership" is probably not the best description. Searching the Bahá'í Writings to gain a deeper understanding of what leadership means in a spiritual context, one will find countless allusions to two somewhat antithetical discourses. On the one hand, there are plentiful passages referring to the desire for leadership as a characteristic of those who are attracted to the desire for power. For example, Bahá'u'lláh notes how religious leaders of the past have misled their followers by the desire to retain their positions: "Leaders of religion, in every age, have hindered their people from attaining the shores of eternal salvation, inasmuch as they held the reins of authority in their mighty grasp. Some for the lust of leadership, others through want of knowledge and understanding, have been the cause of the deprivation of the people" (Kitáb-i-Íqán 15).

On the other hand, there are quite as many passages discussing the

necessity for humankind at every level to exhibit and maintain virtuous leadership and guidance. For while service to humankind is the hallmark of the Bahá'í teachings, everyone is, at some level, both a servant and a leader, a student and a teacher. Nowhere is this dual function more evident than in the guidance of the current Five Year plans of the Universal House of Justice in which a culture of learning is characterized by a process where everyone is striving to understand the nature of true servitude, while simultaneously accompanying and tutoring others: "The first quality for leadership, both among individuals and Assemblies, is the capacity to use the energy and competence that exists in the rank and file of its followers" (Shoghi Effendi, quoted in *Building Momentum* 16).

Of course, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, whose very title, meaning "Servant of Bahá" (Bahá'u'lláh), embodies service, exemplifies perfectly the synthesis of leadership and servitude. On the one hand He forthrightly asserts His station as Center of the Covenant and head of the Bahá'í Faith. And yet He describes this leadership position in terms of a servitude to Bahá'u'lláh:

My name is 'Abdu'l-Bahá, my identity is 'Abdu'l-Bahá, my qualification is 'Abdu'l-Bahá, my reality is 'Abdu'l-Bahá, my praise is 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Thralldom to the Blessed Perfection is my glorious and refulgent diadem; and servitude to all the human race is my

perpetual religion . . . No name, no title, no mention, no commendation hath he nor will ever have except ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. This is my longing. This is my supreme apex. This is my greatest yearning. This is my eternal life. This is my everlasting glory! (*Tablets* 429)

In fact, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá equates servitude with leadership:

This is not servitude but sovereignty, and this is not service but chieftainship and greatness! This is the garment of everlasting glory with which thou hast clothed thyself, and this is the rose of eternal exaltation with which thou hast adorned thy head. It is said in the New Testament: “Whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant.” (*Tablets* 510)

What we are talking about, then, is *transformative servitude*—a process of personal transformation and service to the community. Therefore, in the training, we help participants identify the challenges with which they are struggling. They then examine the assumptions underlying those challenges. These often have to do with preconceptions of human nature, self-serving habits of thinking, expectations about leadership, and definitions of success.

Once they have examined these assumptions based on scientific evidence and universal moral values

found within their own spiritual heritage, they can recognize the flaws in their thinking. They come to realize that the greatest challenge they face is their own personal journey of transformation. They come to realize how indispensable service is in that journey. They are then ready to embrace spiritually informed guidelines with which to construct a conceptual framework for their work. Then, when making difficult decisions or in times of crisis, that principle-based framework can guide them to make the right choices, instead of resorting to previous self-serving habits of thinking.

My own most important learning from this entire journey is that at the heart of servitude is a spiritual journey of personal and collective transformation, for it is only through service that we can transform ourselves, our communities, and ultimately our world.

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Is Spirituality Effective in Addiction Recovery and Prevention?

ABDU'L-MISSAGH
GHADIRIAN
and SHADI SALEHIAN

Abstract

Affecting millions, the rise of substance abuse,¹ particularly opioids, has become a global health crisis, the leading cause of death and disability worldwide. Despite extensive scientific advances in understanding the complex biopsychosocial components of this phenomenon, there is no relief in sight. Yet, research studies during the past twenty years reveal an important role for spirituality and religion in prevention and recovery. The primary purpose of this article is to explore this role, examine various theories that have emerged about the positive influence of spirituality, and consider how an effective approach to prevention and treatment might be realized.

Résumé

Touchant des millions de personnes, l'augmentation du taux d'abus de substances, en particulier d'opioïdes, est devenue une crise sanitaire mondiale et la première cause de décès et d'invalidité

1 The terms "addiction" and "substance abuse" will be used interchangeably in this article. Moreover, the word "drugs" refers, for the most part, to illicit drugs.

dans le monde. Malgré les progrès scientifiques considérables réalisés quant à la compréhension des composantes biopsychosociales complexes de ce phénomène, il n'y a pas de répit en vue. Pourtant, des recherches menées au cours des vingt dernières années révèlent que la spiritualité et la religion jouent un rôle important dans la prévention et le rétablissement. Le but premier de cet article est d'explorer ce rôle, d'examiner diverses théories qui ont émergé au sujet de l'influence positive de la spiritualité et de considérer comment une approche efficace de prévention et de traitement pourrait être développée.

Resumen

Afectando a millones, el aumento del abuso de sustancias, particularmente opioides, se ha convertido en una crisis global de salud, la causa principal de muerte y discapacidad mundial. A pesar de extensos avances científicos en la comprensión de los componentes biopsicosociales complejos de este fenómeno, no hay alivio a la vista. Sin embargo, estudios investigativos durante los últimos 20 años revelan un rol importante para la espiritualidad y la religión en la prevención y la recuperación. El propósito primario de este artículo es explorar este rol, examinar varias teorías que han emergido sobre la influencia positiva de la espiritualidad, y considerar cómo un enfoque efectivo a la prevención y el tratamiento puede ser realizado.

In 2014, the *New York Times* reported that a thirteen-year-old child had overdosed on heroin and, as a result, he was left paralyzed, confined to a wheelchair and unable to function independently for the rest of his life (Seelye). At a very young age, any

dream he might have had of a productive future had been dashed. Similar situations have been the plight of thousands of people, especially youth, in North America in recent years, calling to mind these words of Bahá'u'lláh: "O Son of Spirit! I created thee rich, why dost thou bring thyself down to poverty? Noble I made thee, wherewith dost thou abase thyself?" (Arabic Hidden Words, no. 22).

The scourge of drug addiction, affecting all strata of society irrespective of socio-economic, cultural, or religious background, afflicts and touches populations in every corner of the globe. The staggering statistics related to the scope and pervasiveness of this disease highlight the urgent need both to understand its nature and to undertake a collective effort to tackle this serious public health crisis. The present article proposes to explore the central role that spirituality plays in human wellbeing and the significant effect it can have on treatment and recovery from addictions.

Addiction to psychoactive drugs is a complex biopsychosocial disease, defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as "the harmful and hazardous use of psychoactive substances, including alcohol and illicit drugs" ("Substance Abuse"). It is a chronic disease with relapsing episodes that cause compulsive drug-seeking behavior and the use of certain substances in spite of their harmful consequences to the addicted individuals and those around them ("Prescription Drug Abuse"). Behavioral symptoms of

addiction vary depending on the type of substance used and the intensity of the condition. While a full description of these symptoms is beyond the scope of this article, psychoactive drugs can overpower the human mind and the brain's normal activities and can disrupt individual judgment, emotion, and behavior. In the long run, the need to repeatedly use these drugs may become a constant preoccupation—what we term an addiction.

Unlike diseases with primarily biological components contributing to their development—such as diabetes, pneumonia, or rheumatoid arthritis—drug addiction is strongly characterized by the involvement of social and psychological factors in its evolution and may, therefore, be responsive to methods that include spirituality—in addition to conventional treatment—in the prevention of its development and in the process of recovery.

PREVALENCE OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE

It is estimated that in 2016, 275 million people (5.6% of the world's population aged sixteen to sixty-four years) used drugs at least once, according to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) ("World Drug Report" 7). Furthermore, thirty-one million in this group suffer from a drug use disorder requiring treatment. The UNODC also states, "Cannabis was the most commonly used drug in 2016, with 192 million people using it at least once in the past year. The global number of cannabis users continues

to rise and appears to have increased by roughly 16 per cent in the decade ending 2016, which is in line with the increase in the world population” (11).

The UNODC’s report indicates that opioids, including heroin, continue to be among the most harmful drugs. In addition to the possibility of both fatal and non-fatal overdoses, users also risk developing infectious diseases—such as HIV and Hepatitis C—and other medical and mental illnesses. When illicit drugs such as cocaine, amphetamines, and cannabis are consumed in combination with one another, users place themselves in great peril. Drug overdoses kill more people than gun homicides, car crashes, and suicides combined, making drug abuse the leading cause of death for Americans under age fifty (“Drug Overdoses”). The toll in the last ten years has surpassed the number of deaths in the Vietnam War and is accelerating yearly.

Although the tragic opioid epidemic in North America has attracted significant public attention, a dangerous rise in the use of alcohol is also of great concern. In the United States, for example, research reveals that in recent decades there has been an increase in the use of alcohol among the elderly, women, and minorities. In older individuals, alcohol abuse can result in higher levels of alcohol in their blood, with disturbing consequences, such as impairment of judgement, loss of coordination, falls, and other sorts of accidents.

According to the WHO, alcohol and tobacco are considered psychoactive

substances that can cause dependency (“Substance Abuse”). Nevertheless, they are not treated as “controlled substances” and are still widely accepted as harmless (or even desirable) by society when consumed in moderation. The number of college-aged women drinking is approaching that of men—another cause of concern because women are more prone to experiencing blackouts when blood alcohol levels rise too high. In addition, excessive alcohol consumption puts them at greater risk of breast cancer (Schuckit, qtd. in Blake 23).

The notion that the experience of pain should be eliminated or reduced to extremely low levels—a trend in medical treatment that quickly gained ground in the 1990s—has resulted in the rise in opiate use that has now reached epidemic proportions in the United States and Canada. The U.S. Centers for Disease Control reported that in 2016 alone more than 64,000 Americans died of drug overdose, the equivalent of 142 deaths daily, or one death every nineteen minutes (“Provisional Counts”). Of these, seventy-eight percent are caused by fentanyl, or other prescription opioids. In fact, it is estimated that one in seven Americans has abused prescription drugs.

Another important impact of drug addiction is the cost to society. For example, in the United States, the annual cost of addiction (tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drugs) in terms of lost work productivity, healthcare, and crime, is estimated to be over \$740 billion, a

figure greater than the GDP of many developing countries. Illicit drugs and prescription opioids are estimated to burden healthcare with a combined \$350 billion of otherwise needless expense (“Prescription Drug Abuse”).

This cost is astronomical in comparison with how the same money could be spent were it applied to primary healthcare, public health, preventive education, and other endeavors that could improve the lives of the general public. Such calculations of economic impact, however, do not and cannot ever reflect the extent of human suffering and the toll taken on individual lives, families, and communities shattered by substance abuse.

RISK AND PREDISPOSING FACTORS

Because there are many predisposing factors that lead to substance abuse, there is no magic bullet for prevention of addiction, and hence no single approach will be sufficient for its treatment. Risk factors may be biological, psychological, or cultural. Genetic and biological predisposing factors have been extensively studied, in particular among alcoholics. A family history of alcoholism or other addictions combined with a genetic predisposition may make some individuals susceptible to substance abuse. Patients with mental illness are more at risk for substance abuse disorders, a fact that further complicates treatment for this group of individuals. As mental disorders such as depression and other psychiatric afflictions affect twenty-five

percent of the world’s population (“Mental Disorders”), the added risk of psychoactive drug abuse is of immense concern.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse lists the risk and protective factors in drug abuse as follows:

Protective factors:

- strong and positive family bonds;
- parental monitoring of children’s activities and peers;
- clear rules of conduct that are consistently enforced within the family;
- involvement of parents in the lives of their children;
- success in school performance;
- strong bonds with institutions, such as school and religious organizations; and
- adoption of conventional norms about drug use.

Risk factors:

- chaotic home environments, particularly in which parents abuse substances or suffer from mental illnesses;
- ineffective parenting, especially with children with difficult temperaments or conduct disorders;
- lack of parent-child attachments and nurturing;
- inappropriately shy or aggressive behavior in the classroom;
- failure in school performance;
- poor social coping skills;

- affiliations with peers displaying deviant behaviors; and
- perceptions of approval of drug-using behaviors in family, work, school, peer, and community environments.

Family conflict and the general breakdown of family life remove a major protective factor in social, mental, and spiritual wellbeing and also pose significant risk factors for addictive behavior. Individuals who have a history of traumatic experiences—especially women who have been subjected to abuse and soldiers who have returned from a traumatizing war zone, thereby experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and depression—are also at risk for developing substance abuse disorders.

It is also well-known that people tend to mirror behavior of their friends and colleagues, especially during teenage and college years when they are most susceptible to social pressures and may be more inclined to adopt adverse behavior in order to be accepted. Consequently, peer pressure has been shown to be a strong predictor of experimentation with drug use, and early exposure to habit-forming drugs can have long-lasting effects; therefore, for many people, experimentation in teenage years results in devastating consequences in later life (Ghadirian, *Alcohol and Drug Abuse* 79). The increased availability of illegal drugs combined with freedom to indulge in pleasure-seeking behavior has further contributed to the current extent of this tragedy.

As mentioned earlier, the current trend in pain management has magnified an existing danger because a history of prolonged exposure to opioids after medical treatment can also be a major risk factor in the development of addiction. This danger is now at the center of the greatest public health challenge affecting the North American continent.

THE OPIOID CRISIS

In a materialistic society, happiness is perceived as a commodity that can be purchased in a store, kept in a bottle, consumed in pills, and served at parties. This type of “happiness” can stimulate the brain and excite the emotions, but it can also lead to addiction and cause accidents, even death (Ghadirian, *Alcohol and Drugs* 85).

However, the search for happiness is not the only reason behind thousands of people’s use of psychoactive drugs. Individuals experiencing pain and discomfort are seldom offered treatment beyond the use of pain-killers, especially prescription opioids, such as morphine, heroin, and codeine. These opioids include drugs such as OxyContin and Vicodin that are mostly prescribed for the treatment of moderate to severe pain. They act by attaching to specific proteins called opioid receptors, which are found on nerve cells in the brain, spinal cord, gastrointestinal tract, and other organs in the body. When these drugs attach to their receptors,

they reduce the perception of pain and can produce a sense of well-being . . . (Volkow 5).

Endorphins, which are morphine-like hormones produced by the central nervous system and the pituitary gland, also have pain-reducing and uplifting effects (Bergland). However, “[w]ith repeated administration of opioid drugs, the production of endogenous opioids [i.e., endorphins] is inhibited, which accounts in part for the discomfort that ensues when the drugs are discontinued (i.e., withdrawal)” (Volkow 5).

There is no easy or definitive answer as to how to prevent and remedy the pervasive spread of substance use in society. Despite significant progress in harm reduction, treatment, and crisis intervention, as well as in primary prevention to counteract opioid abuse, the crisis has not abated. According to the American Academy of Neurology, more than 100,000 people have died in the United States since more liberal opioid prescription began—from 1999 to 2010 (Gagnon 12). It is estimated that more than ninety Americans die every day from opioid overdoses (Levin), in spite of the increased availability and use of Naloxone, which is quite effective in reversing the effects of opioid overdose. One reason for this increase is that sixty percent of patients don’t receive medication-assisted treatment, largely due to the stigma attached to such treatment (qtd. in Levin). Presently, researchers are working on a vaccine to prevent opioid drugs from attaching to nerve

cells. However, is it beneficial to the body, mind, and spirit of human beings to use one chemical to counteract another, or might there be other, better ways to remedy this pervasive crisis of epidemic proportions?

SPIRITUALITY AND SUBSTANCE ABUSE

The choice of modality for treating substance abuse is influenced by theories about its nature, including medical, moral, and social models. The medical model suggests that drug abuse and addiction is a disease requiring diagnosis followed by treatment according to modern medicine—which includes pharmacological, dietary, psychological, and rehabilitative interventions. This model is very popular, especially among medical clinicians and researchers. The moral model of addiction proposes that addictive behavior is a moral defect—that is, the individual intentionally chooses to use drugs and is therefore responsible for the consequences of this choice. It also holds that the addict should be able to cease consumption of psychoactive drugs with the help of counselling and other therapeutic means such as medication, counselling, and so on. The social learning or behavioral model is based on the notion that addiction is a learned behavior that is reinforced by the social environment. As such, an addictive behavior can also be unlearned (UNODC 45). These three theories regarding the dependency of mind and body on addictive substances take biological, moral, and

psychosocial perspectives. However, we posit that there is also a spiritual dimension to addiction that merits exploration.

There is no single, universally agreed-upon definition of spirituality, partly because the human spirit is not a tangible object that can be examined or measured. Some call spirituality a process: "The process of developing one's spiritual capacities is called spiritual growth or simply spirituality" (Hatcher 935–36). Others see it as a science: "Spirituality is a complete science that entails a comprehensive study of the intrinsic nature of the soul and its relationship both to the external world and to Universal Consciousness" (Tigunait 5). Many people associate spirituality with religion, while others do not. Hill and Pargament propose that "spirituality can be understood as a search for the sacred, a process through which people seek to discover, hold on to and, when necessary, transform whatever they hold sacred in their lives" (64–65). Psychiatrist Harold G. Koenig, a leading researcher of spirituality, religion, and medicine, holds that "the concept of spirituality is found in all cultures and societies. It is expressed in an individual's search for ultimate meaning through participation in religion and/or belief in God" (*Medicine, Religion and Health* 13). In this discussion of the relevance of spirituality to addiction, we will employ the terms "spirituality" and "religiosity" in the context of transcendence, that which is beyond the realm of physical reality.

In his review of research studies, Koenig reports that religion/spirituality has a positive effect on hope in seventy-three percent of the population and on optimism in eighty-one percent ("Religion, Spirituality, and Health: A Review and Update" 20). Of course, consumption of illicit drugs gives an illusion that life is pleasant because psychoactive substances can numb and distort one's perception of reality. The desire to seek illicit drugs may be reduced by spiritual beliefs, which, if authentic and based on reality, provide individuals with an intrinsic moral framework that enables them to recognize the actual purpose and meaning in life. According to one study, religion and spirituality are among "the most important cultural factors that give structure and meaning to human values, behaviour and experiences" (Mueller et al. 1225). The authors further state, "Religious and spiritual practices (e.g. meditation, prayer, and worship) engender positive emotions such as hope, love, [and] contentment" (1229).

Unfortunately, the significance of spirituality and religious values in preventing, treating, and recovering from drug abuse has long been ignored or underestimated. A notable exception is Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Its Twelve-Step program contains spiritual principles that enable people to overcome their obsession with drink. AA's success during the past eighty years in empowering addicts to take charge of their lives has finally ignited a great interest among those in the

health sciences. Indeed, even though the mechanism of spiritual empowerment remains an enigma, research studies on AA's Twelve-Step Program have confirmed its efficacy (Kissman and Maurer).

There has been, in fact, an increasing amount of literature in recent decades suggesting that spirituality and religiosity have positive effects on health and wellbeing. Of approximately 1,200 such studies published up to the year 2000, seventy percent were on mental health and thirty percent on physical health; many more studies have been produced since then (Koenig, *Medicine, Religion and Health* 22). For example, Jarusiewicz explored the relationship between personal spirituality and success in addiction recovery. She found that not only did a greater proportion of recovering individuals report having faith beliefs and attaching importance to spirituality than those who showed continuing relapse, but also the converse—that relapsing individuals manifested lower levels of spirituality than those in recovery states.

Researchers White and Laudet also found that there is an inverse relationship between spirituality and drug abuse and addiction—individuals with higher degrees of spirituality or religiosity are less likely to consume alcohol and illicit drugs. Their study suggests that “[t]here is growing evidence that spirituality can serve as an antidote for substance use disorders” (57). These researchers also conducted a study of 354 previously heroin- and

cocaine-dependent people in New York City, which proposed that spirituality can reduce the risk of relapse by acting as a protective buffer against the stress of initial recovery (Laudet and White). Moreover, higher spirituality at the beginning of the study predicted sustained recovery at the follow-up interview.

Neff and MacMaster explored the spiritual transformation process and its implications for behavioral change in individuals with substance abuse, specifically in the context of the AA Twelve-Step program. They suggested that, for such addicted individuals, engaging in a search for meaning in life is fundamental to the process of recovery. They also explored “possible spiritual change mechanisms underlying behavioral change in substance abuse treatment, with a particular focus upon ‘faith-based’ treatment” (47). Among the elements of transformation examined in their study were the effect of role modeling and peer influence in facilitating transformation in belief and behavior; how empathy, forgiveness, and acceptance contribute to individuals’ engagement in efforts to transform their substance abuse behavior into positive attitude and action; what necessary skills reinforce such a change; and how social support in a community setting can assist in the process. In brief, they found that spiritual insights gained can lead to behavioral change, discontinuing drug use, and ultimately recovery.

In the Project MATCH Research Group study, one of the largest

randomized trials of spiritually based treatment, researchers compared Twelve-Step Facilitation Therapy (TSF) with cognitive behavioral skill training and motivational enhancement therapy. Individuals assigned to the TSF group fared at least as well as those assigned to the other two groups, especially in measures of complete abstinence (984).

However, in all these treatment groups, both AA and religiosity or spirituality were shown to have modest positive correlation with the outcomes.

THE ROLE OF RELIGION

Throughout the history of mankind, spirituality and religion have been closely integrated with healing the sick and suffering. Religious beliefs have served as a powerful means of coping with disease and health crises. In particular, prayer has played an important role in alleviating suffering. Indeed, in the past it was thought that having faith was an essential ingredient in the pursuit of whole-person care within the doctor-patient relationship (Ghadirian, "Spiritual Dimension"). In the nineteenth century, Canadian physician Sir William Osler stated, "Nothing in life is more wonderful than faith—the one great moving force which we can neither weigh in the balance nor test in the crucible . . . Faith has always been an essential factor in the practice of medicine" (1470). Less than sixty years ago, Carl G. Jung, in a letter to Dr. Bill Wilson,

one of the co-founders of AA, wrote about the relationship between spirituality and substance abuse: "You see, alcohol in Latin is *spiritus* and you use the same word for the highest religious experience as well as the most depraving poison. The helpful formula therefore is: *spiritus contra spiritum*." From a biblical perspective, the ancient epithet *spiritus contra spiritum* means that spirits (alcohol) or drugs can drive out spirituality; on the other hand, spirituality may play a protective role, preventing alcohol and psychoactive drugs from prevailing (Miller 980).

Religion provides a sense of meaning in life, and religious involvement serves as a protection against substance abuse disorders. Interestingly, the word "religion" comes from the Latin *religare*, which means "to bind together." In their paper on religiosity's implications for the practice of medicine, Mueller, Plevak, and Rummans note how "most studies have shown that religious involvement and spirituality are associated with better health outcomes, including greater longevity, coping skills, and health-related quality of life . . . [S]everal studies have shown that addressing the spiritual needs of the patient may enhance recovery from illness" (1225). Furthermore, they state that "throughout history, religion and spirituality and the practice of medicine have been intertwined. As a result, many religions embrace caring for the sick as a primary mission" (1225).

A large number of research studies and literature reviews have confirmed

that religious beliefs and practices relate to health and healing (e.g., Koenig, "Religion, Spirituality, and Health"; Miller; Bou-Yong). In one such study, the possible relationship between religious affiliation and alcoholism among medical professionals was examined from 1948 to 1964 among 1,337 medical students at Johns Hopkins University. In 1986, a follow-up study regarding consumption of alcohol was done with these same students, who were by then graduated physicians. Results showed that a lack of affiliation with religion during medical school was a strong predictor of future alcohol problems (Moore et al.). According to a review of research prior to 2000 about the relationship between religiosity and alcohol problems, which evaluated eighty-six research studies, seventy-six found a positive correlation between religiousness and lower alcohol intake, abuse, and dependence (Koenig, *Medicine* 60). In a 2001 study, adults who did not consider religion to be important were three times more likely to binge drink (60). Koenig and his collaborators also found indications that a positive correlation exists between religion and prevention of substance abuse. They noted that of the 175 studies reviewed, 147 suggested that religious beliefs might be a deterrent to the use of alcohol and drugs by children, adolescents, and adults (*Handbook*).

Whereas a material treatment modality meant to remedy a detectable physical deficiency contributing to drug addiction may be easily tested

and measured, spirituality, an intangible phenomenon, cannot be; yet, it may have a protective influence by counteracting the temptation to engage in behaviors that would lead to addiction. As shown in the studies above, lack of religious affiliation and involvement seems to be more often observed among alcoholics and drug addicts. Another relevant observation is that women who are partners of alcoholic men are reportedly much less religious in their attitude and behavior (Miller). Over eighty percent of one hundred studies on religion and alcohol consumption problems imply that there is less incidence of alcoholism for those with religious affiliation or belief (Koenig, *Handbook*). Nevertheless, further study is required to determine whether religion and spirituality are a definitive protective determinant against addiction.

SPIRITUALITY AS A MEDIATOR OR CATALYST

Understanding the dynamics of the influence of the soul and spirituality on healing and recovery from any disease, including addiction, is challenging, partly because contemporary research methodology is unsuited for such an exploration. Such methodology is unable to translate the mystical and intangible influence of religious values and spiritual practices such as love, empathy, compassion, and justice into tangible physical measurements and statistics. Although researchers have formulated questionnaires that

attempt to measure religiosity or spiritual values, those measurements are expressed, for example, as changes in heart rate and blood pressure, which are markers of relaxation during prayer and meditation. However, these measurements fail to explain the mechanism of how prayer or worship results in action through brain function and neurotransmitters—that is, how spiritual power interacts with millions of brain cells to bring about certain actions or behaviors that the present authors assume to originate from the soul. Moreover, the scientific community does not attempt to explain what the soul and spirituality are, especially since science itself does not readily accept the existence of metaphysical reality, let alone the existence of the soul as an essential part of human existence.

The present authors accept that there is a spiritual reality and that the soul itself is a metaphysical essence; due to this non-physicality, the soul and its relationship to human well-being are not measurable through current scientific technology. For this reason, although there are many theories about the influence of spiritual and religious practice and affiliation on treating and preventing drug abuse and addiction, it is not easy to prove them.

Nevertheless, spirituality may support the recovery process. The period of recovery from drug addiction, especially in the beginning, can be very sensitive and perhaps stressful because, after being repeatedly influenced by

addictive drugs for a long time, the faculties of the brain need to restore their normal activities. During this process of healing and severance from the use of addictive drugs, there may be a sense of panic. A recovering alcoholic might say: “I’m sober. Now what do I do?” (White and Laudet 59). The feeling is comparable to the sentiment experienced upon returning home after a long and troubled journey only to find that home no longer seems familiar. In this period of transition, spirituality may provide a new framework of understanding based on personal values and beliefs.

An hypothesis that describes spirituality as a mediator or catalyst in recovery from substance abuse was proposed by White and Laudet in their review of studies on the role of spirituality in recovery from addiction. They concluded that “[s]pirituality can be a catalyst of recovery initiation, a protective shield in early recovery and an increasingly significant dimension of long-term recovery maintenance” and that the role of spirituality in recovery initiation was very remarkable (58). They also found that this catalyst was often activated at a “turning point” such as a near-death experience due to an overdose, a suicide attempt, or the addiction-related death of a close friend.

SOME POSSIBLE MECHANISMS OF SPIRITUALITY’S EFFECT ON ADDICTION

There are some research studies which suggest that meditation, when used as

a spiritual practice, has a beneficial effect on mental health. One such study states, “[t]he exact neural basis of these effects is slowly coming to light and different imaging techniques have elucidated the neural basis of meditative practices. The evidence though preliminary . . . points toward the involvement of the prefrontal and parietal cortices. The available data on meditation focus on activated frontal attentional network” (Mohandas 63). This study shows that the neurobiological results of meditation have positive effects on mental health, implying that meditation as a spiritual practice might have a protective effect against the craving that may lead to substance abuse and addiction. Anxiety, depressive symptoms, and loss of hope and a sense of meaning in life are but some of the psychological experiences that may lead to substance abuse and addiction. Meditation, mindfulness, reliance on faith, and religious beliefs and practices seem to provide a buffer against the tendency toward seeking some temporary and artificial solution, such as illicit drugs.

Spiritual practices such as meditation and prayer can also be a means for enhancing cognition, communication, and creativity, and may even change our perception of reality (Newberg and Waldman 7). Furthermore, spiritual practices reportedly have an effect on the neurotransmitters (chemical messengers released by nerve cells or neurons) of the brain and body. As an example, researchers found a sixty-five percent increase in dopamine

in individuals who practice *yoga nidra*.² It is noted that during meditation there is an increase in the release of dopamine in the brain. This increase is associated with heightened conscious, sensory or imagery perception, and a relaxed and positive experience (Kjaer et al. 257 and 259). However, besides the neuropsychological effects of spirituality on substance abuse, religious teachings and exhortations can also have significant influence on behavior and perception with respect to illicit drug use.

To summarize, the following pragmatic hypotheses may be helpful in understanding the relationship between spirituality and drug addiction:

Religion and spirituality enhance psychological and, likely, physical aspects of wellbeing. For example, in some parts of the world where the consumption of alcohol is strictly forbidden by religion, there is low prevalence of alcoholism and its adverse consequences. The same applies to the non-medical use of psychoactive drugs such as LSD, cocaine, and opioids (Koenig, *Medicine, Religion and Health* 58–59).

Spiritual beliefs provide a sense of hope, social support, and coping mechanisms in dealing with hardships and

² Also known as “yogic sleep,” *yoga nidra* is considered to be an extremely relaxed state of consciousness such as that experienced at the transition between wakefulness and sleep.

life crises, as exemplified by the AA Twelve-Step program, which is based on spirituality and encourages perseverance in abstaining from the use of alcohol.

Spirituality may act as a mediator that empowers individuals to move from being captivated by drug use to being liberated from it. It is important to note that such a transformation depends on faith, the nature of which the human mind is unable to fathom, as well as on individual will.

METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES

Exploring the effect of spirituality on substance abuse disorders and their treatment is fraught with challenges, as several factors can affect the outcome of such studies:

A lack of a universally agreed-upon definition of spirituality and even religiosity among researchers.

A lack of standard evaluation and measurement tools for assessing the effect of spiritual and religious values—although some scales and questionnaires have been developed to measure spirituality based on frequency of worship, attendance at religious services, and other religious practices (Baetz et al.).

The inability of current scientific research to quantify intrinsic and spiritual values.

In brief, methodological problems will continue as long as research in this field remains constrained by measurements based exclusively on material or phenomenal exploration.

A BAHÁ'Í PERSPECTIVE ON ADDICTION

The Bahá'í Writings are very explicit with regard to the non-medical use of drugs. Bahá'ís should abstain from all forms of intoxicants, such as alcohol, drugs, and “hallucinogenic agents, including LSD, peyote and similar substances” (Universal House of Justice, qtd. in Hornby 354). On the other hand, it is important to know that the Bahá'í Faith recognizes the medicinal benefits and therapeutic effects of some of these substances. The use of these drugs is permissible when they are prescribed by a physician; however, recreational drug use is prohibited because it can seriously impair the human brain and mind.

Of course, as mentioned above, it is important to give attention to both the material and the spiritual aspects of treatment—to pair assistance from the medical profession with whatever spiritual methods one might choose to employ. From a Bahá'í point of view, the idea that spirituality has an effect on addiction recovery and prevention stems from the belief that human beings are created noble and are essentially spiritual beings. In fact, the Bahá'í Writings tell us that mental faculties are properties of the soul expressed through the instrumentality of the brain (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 83–84; see also His “Tablet to Auguste Forel”). As such, the brain plays a very important role because, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, the reality of a human being is his thought and intellect (4). Because the brain mediates

between the soul and human thought and intellect, mental functioning and behavioral patterns will be adversely affected by inappropriately used drugs that excessively stimulate or suppress healthy brain activity, especially when such abuse occurs repeatedly or over an extended period.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá elucidates the role and significance of the spirit and the rational soul in the following observation:

The human spirit, which distinguishes man from the animal, is the rational soul, and these two terms—the human spirit and the rational soul—designate one and the same thing. This spirit, which in the terminology of the philosophers is called the rational soul, encompasses all things and, as far as human capacity permits, discovers the realities and becomes aware of the properties and effects, the characteristics and conditions of earthly things.

...

As for the mind, it is the power of the human spirit. The spirit is as the lamp, and the mind as the light that shines from it. (*Some Answered Questions* 55:2–3)

The soul or spirit is a non-material essence independent of the body; yet, when its instrumentality in directing the body is encumbered or damaged, its ability to become edified by physical experience would presumably be severely compromised. At the same time, an analogy in the Bahá'í Writings

explains that bodily or mental infirmity has no effect on the soul by comparing bodily illness or incapacity to a cloud that interposes itself between the sun (the soul) and the earth (the body). Just as the sun continues to shine even though its rays may not be visible because of the cloud, the soul is ever present, even though it may be hidden by the effects of the infirmity:

Know thou that the soul of man is exalted above, and is independent of all infirmities of body or mind. That a sick person showeth signs of weakness is due to the hindrances that interpose themselves between his soul and his body, for the soul itself remaineth unaffected by any bodily ailments. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* 80:2).

The spiritual practice of meditation mentioned above is also highly valued in the Bahá'í Writings. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá states, “The spirit of man is itself informed and strengthened during meditation . . . Meditation is the key for opening the doors of mysteries” (*Paris Talks* 187). Furthermore, He explains that the “faculty of meditation frees man from the animal nature, discerns the reality of things, [and] puts man in touch with God. This faculty brings forth from the invisible plane the sciences and arts” (188).

The following insightful comment seems to imply that through our willpower we can use the power of meditation for good or ill, depending on

whether we focus on elevated or base interests:

The meditative faculty is akin to the mirror; if you put it before earthly objects it will reflect them. Therefore if the spirit of man is contemplating earthly subjects he will be informed of these. But if you turn the mirror of your spirits heavenward, the heavenly constellations and the rays of the Sun of Reality will be reflected in your hearts, and the virtues of the Kingdom will be obtained. Therefore let us keep this faculty rightly directed—turning to the heavenly Sun and not to earthly objects. (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 188)

Applying the above analogy to the subject at hand, it would seem that to fix one's attention on an addictive substance would be like turning one's mirror toward an earthly object. By shifting one's concentration toward more positive ideals, freedom from attachment to addictive substances might be achieved. Moreover, such reflection gives a deeper meaning to the purpose of life and our spiritual destiny, a process which can be quite liberating.

One of the most common feelings among those who are attracted to alcohol and other drugs, especially in a world where love and empathy may be hard to find, is the loss of self-confidence. Having faith, mindfulness, and spiritual understanding of the purpose of life gives one a deeper

perspective on life and its meaning, and thus can naturally be very reassuring. Bahá'u'lláh reminds us about our nature and purpose with these emphatic words: "Thou art My dominion and My dominion perisheth not; wherefore fearest thou thy perishing?" (Arabic Hidden Words no. 14).

FURTHER REFLECTIONS ON THE PREVENTION OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Modern scientific advancements and unprecedented medical discoveries have not been able to mitigate or prevent the rising consumption and abuse of mind-altering and addictive substances. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that "[u]nless the moral character of a nation is educated, as well as its brain and its talents, civilization has no sure basis" (*Paris Talks* 21). In response to this warning, what approach might society take? A sound and appropriate path might include an ongoing preventive educational program that would provide a healthy and protective approach to the eradication of substance abuse.

Easy availability of narcotics and mind-altering drugs may seem enticing; however, a progressive society will take into consideration the vital importance of protecting the minds of the future generation through preventing alcohol and drug abuse. Neurologist and psychiatrist Viktor Frankl in his book *The Doctor and the Soul* expresses an insightful view on people's indulgence in illicit drugs. He criticizes the recreational use of these substances, believing that the

consumption of narcotics and “narcotization” is, effectively, a “spiritual anaesthesia” that can lead to spiritual death. He moreover asserts that “consistent suppression of intrinsically meaningful emotional impulses” can destroy a person’s inner life (88–89).

Furthermore, while consumption and overuse of analgesics and tranquilizers temporarily gratify our physical and emotional needs, their long-term and non-prescribed use can interfere with the ability to deal with life’s challenges. When psychological stress is constantly suppressed without any insight into its meaning gained, we lose an opportunity for personal growth. As Frankl comments, “man’s main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain, but rather to see a meaning in life” (*Man’s Search for Meaning* 179). This, however, does not mean that people should avoid analgesics; rather, they should use them moderately and wisely as they follow medical advice.

An unfortunate impediment in the treatment of substance abuse, which must be overcome, is treatment avoidance due to the perceived shame and stigma attached to this illness. One of the remarkable effects of religion and spirituality is their capacity to cultivate a sense of social support and to nurture caring relationships with those who are sick and suffering. Such support and relationships will not only reduce the stigma and shame, but will also provide a therapeutic as well as a spiritual community characterized by greater caring and acceptance. Indeed,

a caring, compassionate, and supportive community can contribute to the healing process of these patients, who face great emotional challenges in their lives.

CONCLUSION

In May 2017, at the annual conference of the American Psychiatric Association, one of the highlights was a special convocation in which a world-renowned journalist and recovered alcoholic, Elizabeth Vargas, spoke about her addiction (“Highlights”). Vargas acknowledged that one of the important elements of her long and arduous journey to recovery was her faith and spiritual perspective, which allowed her to carry treatment to a successful conclusion. This was a courageous admission before thousands of psychiatrists, many of whom might have been less inclined to share this belief.

Most researchers and clinicians believe that alcoholism is a disease of the brain and treat patients according to the medical model. While medical treatment of addiction is important, we should not underestimate the significance of whole-person care, the role of the soul, and the spiritual needs of the patient, something which unfortunately happens quite often.

The rise of substance abuse disorders and addiction around the world reflects an existential crisis of humanity, which involves not only adults from all walks of life, but also teenagers and children. To counter this crisis,

large-scale comprehensive programs of preventive education, regulation of narcotics and illicit drugs, and more effective harm-reduction policies and programs against all forms of illegal drugs, as well as positive alternatives, need to be put in place (Ghadirian, *Alcohol and Drugs*).

In summary, drug addiction is a global public health crisis affecting millions of people with an astronomical human, economic, and societal cost. There is no single cause and hence no simple solution. This crisis affects all strata of society; it is our collective problem, and it requires a collective solution. Society needs to find innovative ways to solve the problem and to realize that enforcing a solution through legislation will not work by itself. Only a root-cause approach that will change the social environment, protecting people from such a lifelong afflictive disorder, will have a lasting effect.

Research shows that spirituality and religious values have a positive effect and can contribute to public education for substance abuse prevention. Moreover, emerging findings suggest that religious and spiritual practices, including meditation, may have a positive influence on the brain and on human behavior, and thus may contribute to the prevention of, as well as to the recovery from, drug abuse and addiction. Nevertheless, the mechanism whereby an intangible phenomenon such as spirituality or religion influences these processes remains an enigma. This article attempts to unravel

some challenging aspects of this enigma. Indeed, the well-documented results of the twelve steps of AA since the 1930s are a pragmatic testimony that religiosity and spirituality do have positive effects on the preventive and healing processes in drug addiction. This is not to claim that they replace medical and psychosocial efforts in remedying the affliction. Rather, applying religious and spiritual values in the process complements using scientific advances in curbing this widespread crisis of humanity.

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Biographical Information

SHAHLA ALI (BA Stanford, PhD/JD UC Berkeley) is Professor and Associate Dean at the University of Hong Kong's Faculty of Law. Her research centers on questions of governance, development and transnational dispute resolution in East Asia. She currently serves on the Bahá'í Assembly of Hong Kong and its Training Institute.

MENNA ELFYN is an award winning poet, memoirist and playwright. She has published fourteen collections of poetry, children's novels, libretti for UK and US composers, and plays for radio and television. In 1999, she co-wrote "Garden of Light," a choral symphony for the New York Philharmonic. Her books include *Eucalyptus*, *Selected Poems 1978-1994*, *Cell Angel*, *Murmur*, *Bondo* and a memoir in Welsh, *Cennad* (Messenger), published by Barddas in March 2018. She co-edited *The Bloodaxe Book of Modern Welsh Poetry*. Retired from teaching at University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Menna is president of PEN Cymru and lives in South West Wales.

ABDU'L-MISSAGH GHADIRIAN, an author and researcher, is a professor emeritus of McGill University, Faculty of Medicine. He teaches a course on spirituality and ethics in medicine and has published extensively including

the books: *Creative Dimensions of Suffering*, *Steadfastness in the Covenant*, *Alzheimer's Disease: An Eclipse before Sunset* and *Materialism: Moral and Social Consequences*.

PAULA HENDERSON: "My work represents my interest in our social unity and represent opportunities for reflection on our collective and individual spiritual purpose. In Tread, from the Groundwork(s) series, I utilize residual patterns left on ground surfaces from our daily movement the basis of abstract compositions to connect to thoughts of our shared space, our collectivity and spiritual purpose."

Dr. FIRAYDOUN JAVAHERI holds a doctorate in agronomy. As a pioneer to Africa for twenty-seven years, he served the Bahá'í community in his roles of Auxiliary Board member and, then, Continental Counsellor. While in Zambia, he worked as chief technical adviser for the Food and Agricultural Organization (an agency of the United Nations) and assisted, together with his wife Vida, in the establishment of the Banani International Secondary School. Dr. Javaheri served as a member of the International Teaching Centre from 1998 to 2003, and the Universal House of Justice from 2003 to 2018.

Dr. MAY KHADEM is a comprehensive ophthalmologist and public health activist. After serving on the faculty of Northwestern University Department of Ophthalmology for 25 years, she

moved to China where for seven years she assisted the development of rural eye care in several provinces. May was one of the co-founders of Health for Humanity, a not-for-profit charitable organization where she served as the organization's Executive Director for seventeen years. She has served as consultant to many international organizations active in blindness prevention including the World Health Organization, where she co-authored a leadership training manual and offered leadership training workshops for WHO's Good Governance in Medicines Programme and for the International Agency for the Prevention of Blindness.

SHADI SALEHIAN served at Research Department Bahá'í World Center Israel for many years. She holds a Master of Public Health from Johns Hopkins University. Her main research and work focus on displaced populations and refugees with access to health as vital component of social integration. She also collaborates with the Global Institute for Health and Human Rights in working with displaced populations in Syria.

DAVID SMITH became a Bahá'í forty-eight years ago in Saginaw, Michigan. Now retired, his career took him down many paths, including serving as the Secretary of the Bahá'í National Education Committee for seven years. Photography has been a lifelong passion that he inherited from his father.

NINA ISRAEL ZUCKER's work has appeared in the anthology, *Poets Against the War*, edited by Sam Hamill, and in the *30/30* series for Tupelo Press, the *New York Times*, US1 Worksheets, and many other journals. She has participated in the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation's Poetry Festival, as well as leading the program for educators, *Clearing the Spring/ Tending the Fountain*. She is a teacher of English as a Second Language in Cherry Hill, New Jersey.



Sleeping Bear Path

(Sleeping Bear Dunes National Lakeshore, Michigan, July 2006)

DAVID SMITH