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From the Editor's Desk

The Editorial Committee

This issue of the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* is the fruit of collaboration between nine authors, writing on the topic of constructive resilience. The development of this issue has been an experiment in collaborative processes of scholarship, and it stands as one early milestone in learning about this kind of collaboration. Before turning to the rich topic of constructive resilience itself, we wish to share with you, the *Journal*'s readers, some of the broader context of collaborative work at the Association for Bahá'í Studies in general, and invite those interested in this area of learning to consider how they might contribute to it.

In its 24 July 2013 letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada on the topic of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, the Universal House of Justice highlighted the possibilities for the Association to foster a collaborative approach to scholarship. It advised that,

> [f]or example, a number of small seminars could be held to assist individuals from certain professions or academic disciplines to examine some aspect of the discourse of their field. Specific topics could be selected, and a group of participants with experience could share articles, prepare papers, and consult on contemporary perspectives and related Bahá'í concepts.

In our understanding, this encouragement of collaborative scholarly endeavors does not have a merely functional or pragmatic benefit. It is rooted in a particular conception of knowledge, namely, that an elicitive and reflexive mode of engaging with ideas creates insights, elucidates questions that are obscure, and generates understanding.

Indeed, this mode of engagement is integral to the language of Revelation itself in the Bahá'í Faith, where we often see the Voice of the Divine speaking to humanity about how humanity should communicate back to the Divine. How many times does Bahá'u'lláh instruct us to "Say…" when speaking to our Creator, before Himself responding in that Voice. If such an ethic of reciprocity animates our efforts to grapple with questions about the very purpose and truth of our existence, how much value it must also have as a method of engaging together in our quest to gain knowledge about the world around us.

It has been encouraging to see collaboration in this vein burgeon in the past few years throughout the Bahá'í world. The Association for Bahá'í Studies has striven to be a part of these efforts, designating a Committee for Collaborative Initiatives specifically to help support them. Working groups organized within professional and academic disciplines, as well as reading groups and cross-disciplinary seminars

devoted to specific topics, have been convened, in which participants are learning together. It is exciting to think of what these will yield in the future.

This issue of the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* is another step in our journey of learning about collective processes of scholarship. Its nine essays are the product of a collaborative process, self-organized by the authors, that unfolded over a period of three years. In neither its process nor its substance is it an endpoint, but, as stated at the outset, a milestone, allowing us another opportunity to see what is being learned, and where the paths may lead next.

This issue also builds on recent efforts in the *Journal* to publish entire issues on single topics or themes, often dealing with questions of social change or racial justice. Examples include Volume 26, No. 3, centering on Indigenous experiences, and Volume 29, No. 1–2, on "the most challenging issue." Those special issues also represented efforts to advance a more collaborative process in a range of ways, while addressing some of the challenges seen in contemporary scholarship. For example, Volume 26.3, with the guidance of an Indigenous guest editor, sought to uphold a standard of cultural humility and emphasize voices and experiences from which much must be learnt. It is our hope to continue that learning, including by building on the insight that has come through the development of the current issue.

Scholars' methodologies for generating insight and understanding are dynamic and fluid. No facet of human endeavor, including the work of scholars, is untouched by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, under whose influence humanity's understandings of the activity of scholarship will continue to mature and evolve. As we share these reflections on the context and process through which this issue emerged, we invite readers, and those involved in collaborative processes of scholarship, to reflect on how we can continue to build on these efforts, and advance ever more effective, inclusive, and impactful practices. We welcome you to send us your thoughts, including ideas for collaborative initiatives, at editor@bahaistudies.ca.

Another area of learning that deserves particular attention pertains to the styles of writing found in this issue. Each essay in this collection is shorter than the typical *Journal* article, allowing a greater number of voices to contribute. Together, the essays present a stylistic continuum, from traditionally academic to personal and introspective. At its core, scholarship is a matter of generating and disseminating knowledge. Scholars who seek to share the knowledge generated by reflection on their own life experience must necessarily speak in a different voice from those studying phenomena outside themselves, if they are to do justice to their story. The *Journal* has previously welcomed submissions that sit at various places on this continuum as appropriate given their subject matter, and we look forward to publishing more work

in the future that can enrich our vision of the forms scholarship can take.

This collection of essays opens with "The Constructive Imaginary," in which Michael Karlberg provides a fuller glimpse of the collaborative process that found expression in this issue of the *Journal*, and that will doubtless continue to bear fruit in the future. He also sketches a genealogy of the concept of constructive resilience, drawing connections both to academic schools of thought and to historical social expressions of the phenomenon, and emphasizes the urgency of drawing on these resources to help us "imagine and enact new possibilities in the pursuit of social change."

The experience of African Americans and African-descended people more broadly is explored from a range of vantage points in a number of the essays in this issue. Michael Penn's "Why Constructive Resilience? An Autobiographical Essay" interweaves the powerful examples of constructive resilience that the author has perceived in his own life with a psychological examination of the roots of hope and despair, shedding light on the poignant reality that "resilience does not only consist of the capacity to endure and survive stress; it is reflected in the powers and capacities that unfold as a result of exposure to it." Elizabeth de Souza's "Views from a Black Artist in the Century of Light" considers the unique, and vital, role of art in constructive resilience through an exploration of the life and works of the author's father, McCleary "Bunch" Washington, who, in the face of the challenges posed by a society that struggled to understand his three main strands of identity—artist, African American, and Bahá'í—was able to "resolve in his art what he could not in his life." The experience of African American Bahá'ís, and the insight it can provide into the meaning of constructive resilience, is further explored in Derik Smith's "New Black Power: Constructive Resilience and the Efforts of African American Bahá'ís," which shows how these efforts can help us conceive of power itself in new and vital ways. Layli Maparyan's "Africanity, Womanism, and Constructive Resilience: Some Reflections" locates a rich resource for helping us think about constructive resilience in "the cultural and cosmological wealth of African and African-descended people" and, in particular, in the everyday, problem-solving experiences of Black women, reminding us that however loud the narratives around conflict-based social change in our society, the peoples of the world have deep experience with constructive change.

Other essays in this issue use different lenses to consider the power and implications of constructive resilience. Sahar Sattarzadeh's "When We In/visibilize Our Nobility…" invites us to consider the lens of domestic partner and gender-based violence, and how roles such as "victim" and "survivor" might be transcended as we learn to view others, and ourselves, as the noble beings Bahá'u'lláh reminds us we are. Caity Bolton's "Community Agency and Islamic Education

in Contemporary Zanzibar" uses an ethnographic approach to illuminate the constructive potential of religiously grounded community initiatives for recognizing and addressing social harms. The role of faith is further explored in Bradley Wilson's "Faith in Action: Reflections on Constructive Resilience from Nicaragua," which illustrates how for landless farmworkers in Nicaragua, even under circumstances of crushing social and economic oppression, faith has remained a potent resource, motivating and empowering their movement for justice. Finally, with Holly Hanson's "Vision and the Pursuit of Constructive Social Change," we return to the question of imagination, and are reminded of the need to learn from the examples set by those who have trod, and continue to tread, the path of constructive resilience.

In the substance of the ideas it explores, this special issue of the *Journal* builds on what has come before, and helps set the stage for further work to come. The concept of constructive resilience, though not so named, has been showcased in previous *Journal* articles about the lived experiences of individuals and groups. For example, the accounts shared in Volume 26.3, highlighted constructive responses of Indigenous people, Bahá'ís and others, to the ongoing impacts of colonialism and systemic racism—from institutionalized oppression to unconscious attitudes. Some of these articles shared first-person stories and accounts of Indigenous people demonstrating constructive resilience. As highlighted in the "From the Editor's Desk" prefacing that issue, the work of eradicating racial injustice

> requires the hard work of transforming mindsets and behaviors. It also necessitates that humankind discover and implement methods for reordering detrimental social and structural patterns and establishing collaborative relationships upheld by a collective vision of justice and fellowship at the levels of the neighborhood and community life. But this journey toward justice and unity is one of learning, trial and error, sacrifice, love, and pain.

As you read this collection of essays, we hope you will be impressed by the vital importance of all of us learning something about constructive resilience from those who have practiced it. Indigenous peoples, in North America and worldwide; the Iranian Bahá'í community and many other religious groups around the globe today and historically; the African American community, which is the focus of a number of contributions in this issue—these are a few examples of groups with deep, practical knowledge of constructive resilience. And, of course, there is much work to be done examining the relationship between constructive resilience and gender inequality in humanity's history. It is amongst those who have borne and continue to bear the brunt of social injustice that the tool of constructive resilience has been forged, honed, tested, broken, and reforged, again and again.

But today, all of us, to greater or lesser degrees, may have to learn about constructive resilience. The Universal House of Justice re-affirmed this reality in its 25 November 2020 letter on the occasion of the Day of the Covenant:

> Your resilience and your unwavering commitment to the well-being of those around you, persistent through all difficulties, have filled us with tremendous hope. But it is no wonder that, in some other quarters, hope has become a depleted resource. There is a mounting realization on the part of the world's people that the decades ahead are set to bring with them challenges among the most daunting that the human family has ever had to face. The current global health crisis is but one such challenge, the ultimate severity of whose cost, both to lives and livelihoods, is yet unknown; your efforts to succour and support one another as well as your sisters and brothers in society at large will certainly need to be sustained, and in places expanded.

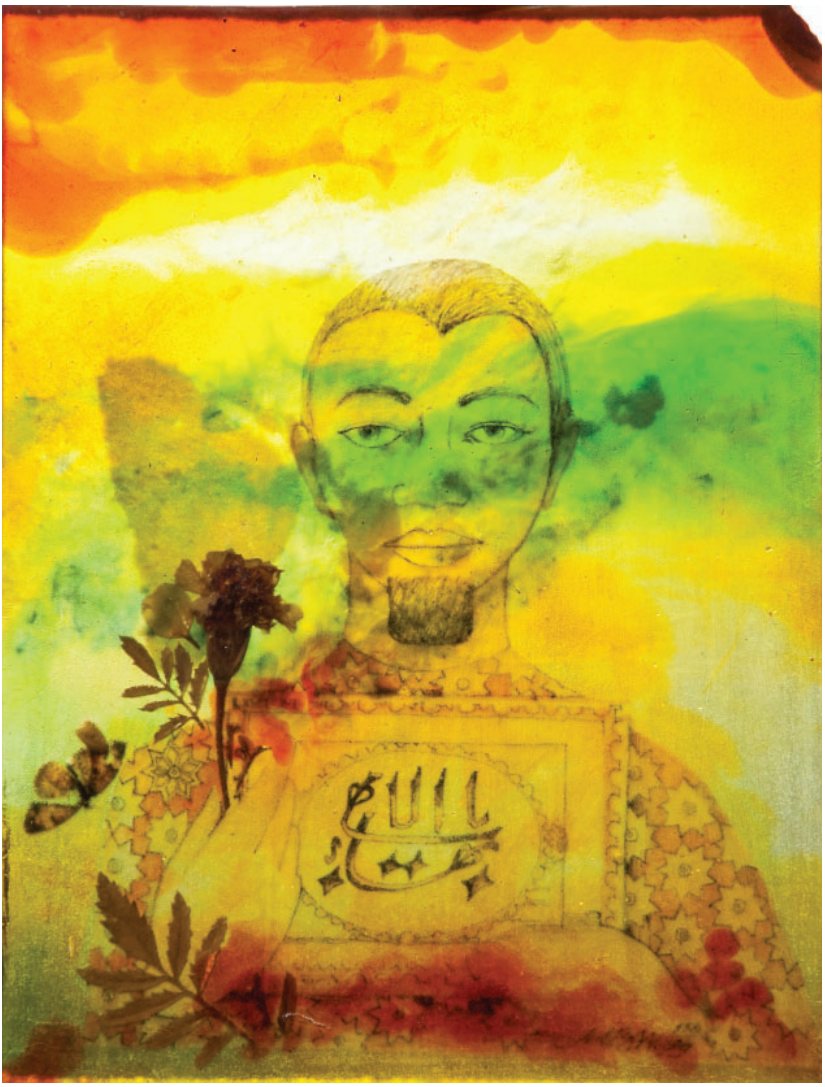
The reader may well wonder if they hear echoes in this message of Bahá'u'lláh's warning to humanity in the Hidden Words:

> O ye peoples of the world! Know, verily, that an unforeseen calamity is following you, and that grievous retribution awaiteth you. Think not the deeds ye have committed have been blotted from My sight. By My beauty! All your doings hath My Pen graven with open characters upon tablets of chrysolite.

It seems worth asking what the connection might be between the deeds committed by the peoples of the world and the promised calamity. It does not seem implausible that whatever difficulties humanity will collectively face in the next few decades, our own injustices will be at their root. And, in its death throes, the old world order will doubtless throw up new injustices and difficulties; who can hope to be untouched by them?

This may well be the time for us all to learn about constructive resilience. That learning will begin by listening to the hard-won wisdom of those for whom constructive resilience is an old friend.

For all of these reasons, we are pleased to present this issue on constructive resilience. We sincerely hope that our readers will draw inspiration both from the substance of these essays on constructive resilience, and from their illumination of the possibilities of collaborative scholarship. ABS is eager to offer support to anyone who has a vision for what future collaborative initiatives might look like. Meanwhile, the Association plans both to support future endeavors centered on learning about the process of collaborative scholarship, and to pursue what we can and must learn from the practice of constructive resilience by peoples all across the globe.



Holding the Greatest Name
M. BUNCH WASHINGTON

The Constructive Imaginary

MICHAEL KARLBERG

This special issue of the *Journal* marks a moment in a journey by a group of collaborators exploring the implications of an emerging concept with profound relevance to twenty-first century struggles for social justice. To understand the nature and purpose of this journey, it will help to know a little about the process that led us here. Before considering this process, however, it is important to note that the collection of essays in this journal represents only a small number of voices offering contributions at only one moment in a wider ongoing conversation. Many important voices and perspectives are absent from this collection, but not all things can be accomplished in any given setting. This collection of essays thus constitutes an invitation for all relevant voices to contribute, over time, to this expanding conversation.

This conversation began when, on 9 September 2007, the Universal House of Justice wrote a letter to Iranian Bahá'í students deprived of access to higher education in their country. In that letter, the House of Justice wrote:

> Recent events call to mind heart-rending episodes in the history of the Faith, of cruel deceptions wrought against your forebears. It is only appropriate that you strive to transcend the opposition against you with that same *constructive resilience* that characterized their response to the duplicity of their detractors. Peering beyond the distress of the difficulties assailing them, those heroic souls attempted to translate the Teachings of the new Faith into actions of spiritual and social development. This, too, is your work. Their objective was to build, to strengthen, to refine the tissues of society wherever they might find themselves; and thus, they set up schools, equally educating girls and boys; introduced progressive principles; promoted the sciences; contributed significantly to diverse fields such as agriculture, health, and industry—all of which accrued to the benefit of the nation. You, too, seek to render service to your homeland and to contribute to a renewal of civilization. They responded to the inhumanity of their enemies with patience, calm, resignation, and contentment, choosing to meet deception with truthfulness and cruelty with good will towards all. You, too, demonstrate such noble qualities and, holding fast to these same principles, you belie the slander purveyed against your Faith, evoking the admiration of the fair-minded. (italics added)

The phrase first employed in this letter—*constructive resilience*—has since been employed by the Universal House of Justice in many other letters. Over

time, it has captured the imagination of growing numbers of people because it is pregnant with meaning. This special issue of the *Journal* has emerged from conversations among one group of friends who have been exploring the meaning of this phrase, its relationship to other concepts in prevailing discourses on social change, and its broad relevance to the exigencies of the age.

In the reflections immediately below, the collaborative process that led to this special issue is shared, to underscore the value of this kind of collaborative inquiry. Some of the more salient insights that emerged from this process are also shared. In the latter regard, it should be noted that constructive resilience is neither an entirely new way of thinking about social change, nor is it a mere reiteration of previous conceptions of social change. Rather, aspects of constructive resilience have been explored by a range of previous thinkers, and have been embodied in a range of previous movements. What our collective inquiry has attempted to do is to bring into focus some of these prior conceptions and illustrations, and assemble them into a more coherent picture that expands our social imaginary.

The initial point of departure for my own study of constructive resilience traces back to my doctoral defense just over twenty years ago. My dissertation[1] examined the competitive logic around which many Western liberal institutions and practices are constructed. According to this logic, human nature is essentially self-interested, so societies should be organized in competitive ways that harness all that selfish energy for the greater good. We see this logic expressed in partisan political systems, adversarial legal systems, capitalist economies, grade-based education systems, and even many contemporary forms of recreation and leisure.

In my dissertation, I analyzed the social and ecological consequences of this "culture of contest." My conclusion, in short, was that when most social institutions and practices are organized as contests of physical, political, or economic power, they privilege the short-term material interests of those who enter the contests with the most inherited power. This occurs at the expense of less powerful segments of society, and at the expense of future generations. The result is widespread social injustice and ecological ruin.

My dissertation also examined the way these unjust and ruinous outcomes cause many people to arise in protest. This is very understandable, and I share the underlying commitments to social justice and environmental stewardship that tend to animate such responses. Yet oppositional protests can inadvertently replicate and reinforce the underlying logic of the culture of contest. For instance, oppositional responses to

1 This dissertation was later published as *Beyond the Culture of Contest: From Adversarialism to Mutualism in an Age of Interdependence* (George Ronald, 2004).

social injustice can reinforce assumptions about the inherently competitive or conflictual nature of human beings, along with assumptions about the inevitability of interest group competition in the social sphere—which constitute suppositional foundations of the culture of contest. Hence the paradox of protest in a culture of contest.[2] The culture of contest gives rise to myriad injustices, which in turn give rise to oppositional dissent, which in turn reinforces the underlying logic of the culture of contest that gives rise to the injustices in the first place.

The way to transcend this paradox, I argued, is through a non-adversarial approach focused on the active construction of radically new institutions and practices organized around a more just logic.[3] For instance, the competitive electoral processes that emerged in Western liberal societies are inherently vulnerable to the corrupting influence of money, because electoral competitions are expensive to wage. This is a primary reason just and responsible governance has proven so elusive in Western liberal forms of democracy. One response to these endemic injustices is through protest. Another response is to begin constructing new democratic electoral forms that are free from competition and partisanship.[4] To the extent that new social forms such as this can attract people away from prevailing ones, growing numbers of people can withdraw their participation from unjust social forms, which would eventually collapse of attrition. The culture of contest might thus be transcended, over time, through the construction of emancipatory social forms that supplant oppressive ones. In my dissertation, I offered examples that illustrate this dynamic.

After I made this point, one of my examiners countered, "That may work under some favorable conditions, but surely it's impossible under conditions of violent repression." As we were speaking, on the other side of the planet, the Bahá'ís of Iran were patiently advancing constructive processes of

2 See Michael Karlberg, "The Paradox of Protest in a Culture of Contest."

3 A broadly similar argument was advanced in the early twentieth century by Gandhi, in his booklet titled *Constructive Programme: Its Meaning and Place* (1941). This argument was echoed by Carl Boggs' articulation of the concept *prefigurative politics* in his essay "Revolutionary Process, Political Strategy, and the Dilemma of Power"; and this concept of prefiguration was later taken up to some degree within various feminist and New Left movements. Such ideas have more recently been engaged by contemporary social change theorists such as Majken Jul Sørensen (see "Constructive Resistance: Conceptualizing and Mapping the Terrain,") and Karuna Mantena (see "Gandhi and the Means-Ends Question in Politics"). I engage this literature more directly in the sixth chapter of my most recent book, *Constructing Social Reality* (see pages 180–188).

4 For an illustration of a proven electoral system that is entirely free from partisanship and competition, refer to Michael Karlberg, "Western Liberal Democracy as New World Order?"

social transformation under conditions of violent repression. But this story had never been told through the lens I articulated in my dissertation. After my defense, I realized the need to do that.

As I began to write about this, I received a copy of the 9 September 2007 letter from the Universal House of Justice alluded to above. When I read the phrase *constructive resilience*, it crystalized in my mind precisely what I was trying to articulate. This phrase distills what it means to exercise transformative constructive agency under conditions of violent repression. So the phrase provided the organizing logic, and the title, for the article I was writing, which was subsequently published by the journal *Peace & Change*.

Over the decade that followed, the Universal House of Justice used the phrase "constructive resilience" in other letters, and the concept was becoming the object of increasing attention. In 2017, I invited three friends whose scholarship is relevant to this concept to help organize a conference panel on the topic. Insights generated from that experience then informed several presentations at other conferences. Soon after, we planned an intensive weekend seminar on this concept, in Washington, D.C., with a dozen people from as many disciplines. Insights generated from the D.C. seminar informed further conference presentations and further conversations among the four of us.

On 4 February 2018, the Universal House of Justice wrote a letter to an individual about the ongoing challenge of racism in the United States. In that letter, the House of Justice expressed its hope

> that those friends in the United States who resolve to renew their commitment to uprooting racism and laying the basis for a society that reflects interracial harmony can draw insight and inspiration from the unwavering resolve of the Bahá'ís in Iran. The messages written to the friends there in recent years, most of which have been translated into English and are publicly available, are instructive in this regard. For almost two centuries, and particularly the last four decades of relentless oppression, the Bahá'ís in Iran have remained forward-looking, dynamic, vibrant, and committed to serving Iranian society. They have refused to allow apprehension and anxiety to take hold or let any calamity perturb their hearts. They have drawn on the highest reservoirs of solidarity and collaboration and responded to oppression with constructive resilience, eschewing despair, surrender, resentment, and hate and transcending mere survival, to transform conditions of ignorance and prejudice and win the respect and collaboration of their fair-minded countrymen. Those believers in the United States who have labored so persistently to promote race unity, especially the African

> American friends, should appreciate in their own efforts over the years the same expression of constructive resilience, born of their great love for Bahá'u'lláh, and see in the recent turmoil opportunity rather than obstacle.

In the months following the arrival of this letter, the four friends alluded to above organized another seminar, held at the Highlander Research and Education Center in Appalachian Tennessee. Of the thirty participants who attended this seminar, the majority were African American, and the preceding passage was one of the focal points of our discussions. How can the constructive resilience of African Americans be articulated in ways that illuminate this powerful concept and illustrate its universal relevance? And where can we see other expressions of constructive resilience that further illuminate our understanding?

Immediately following the Highlander seminar, a workshop was offered in Atlanta at the annual conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies, and approximately one hundred people attended. Some months later, another weekend gathering was held in Washington, D.C., with nine participants who had attended the previous D.C. or Highlander seminars and had expressed an interest in further engagement. That latter gathering in D.C. led to other academic presentations, along with the development of two university courses. Those same nine participants were also invited to serve on a nine-person panel for a plenary audience at the 2019 annual conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies in Ottawa. It is those nine panelists who are the contributors to this special issue of the *Journal*.

The process alluded to above was a journey of mutual learning characterized by ongoing consultative inquiry, the testing of ideas in diverse spaces with diverse groups, reflection on experience, and refinement of language, concepts, and approaches. Of course, this conversation has not yet widened enough to embrace all relevant voices and perspectives. For instance, Indigenous voices will further illuminate the concept of constructive resilience in powerful ways. Nonetheless, this initial conversation has already carried its participants to a place at which no individual, journeying alone, could have arrived.

The essays collected here provide an opportunity to share a range of insights and reflections that have arisen, so far, on this path. By sharing these, we hope to inspire others to contribute further on this path of learning.

In sharing our initial insights, we've adopted a less formal, less academic style than is typical of academic journals. We've come to appreciate that it's rarely possible to "persuade" people of the value of constructive resilience through formal academic arguments. Though constructive resilience is an eminently rational concept, recognizing this requires a degree of intuition and inspiration. Constructive resilience speaks as much to the heart as the intellect.

In keeping with this approach, I'm also dispensing, in this introductory essay, with the convention of summarizing each subsequent essay. The essays speak for themselves. Instead, I was asked by my peers to share some of my personal insights into constructive resilience, which have emerged along this path of learning.

For me, the concept of constructive resilience expands what social theorists call our "social imaginary"—our ability to imagine and enact new possibilities in the pursuit of social change. Imagination is a way of knowing. Our imaginations are informed, in part, by the stories we hear, including stories about who we are and how we got here.

At my doctoral defense, my examiner had never heard the story I later learned to tell about the Bahá'ís in Iran. Nor, it seems, had she heard any other stories of radical constructive agency coupled with resilience under conditions of violent repression. So, those possibilities lay outside the boundaries of her social imaginary.

Stories of social change have seldom been told in ways that bring constructive resilience into focus. Consider the many stories that tend to circulate about violent insurrections. Think, for instance, of the American and French revolutions, the Haitian revolution, or the Bolshevik and Maoist revolutions. We also hear many stories of nonviolent resistance. Think, for instance, of the struggle for independence in India, or the U.S. civil rights movement, or the Arab Spring.

Though the means of struggle differ between the first and second set of stories, the storylines are similar in important ways. In both sets of stories, a population that considers itself oppressed in some way engages its adversary directly in a confrontation leading to victory or defeat. Such stories have shaped our social imaginary when it comes to how people can struggle for change. This does not mean the substance of these stories is imaginary. They reflect the experiences of countless revolutionaries and activists, many of whom deserve our respect and admiration. But these dominant narratives displace other stories we could tell about other ways people have struggled for social change, thereby limiting our conception of what such struggles have looked like in the past and what they might look like in the future.

To understand the implications, it helps to contrast *constructive* forms of agency with *contentious* forms of agency—a distinction that other theorists of social change have also made.[5] In the simplest terms, constructive agency is focused on *building* a more just social order. Contentious agency is focused on *disrupting* or *dismantling* an unjust social order. Both forms of agency can be motivated by commitments to social justice and by the corresponding

5 See, for instance, Sean Chabot and Stellan Vintagen, "Decolonizing Civil Resistance."

pursuit of social change. But the means by which these ends are pursued differ.

The distinction between constructive agency and contentious agency need not be laden with value judgments. "Constructive" is not a synonym for "good" in this context and "contentious" is not a synonym for "bad." Both forms of agency may be needed in the broader scheme of things. Yet, this distinction enables us to notice forms of struggle that otherwise go unnoticed; to see protagonists who otherwise go unseen; to tell stories that otherwise go untold; to imagine futures that otherwise go unpursued.

For instance, the story I learned in school about the struggle for racial justice in the United States is the story of nonviolent protests and civil disobedience that culminated in the 1960s. It's a remarkable story that needs to be told, with countless heroes who deserve our admiration. More recently, the Movement for Black Lives is being told as the next chapter in this story of nonviolent resistance, with a new generation of heroes who clearly deserve our admiration.

While these stories need to be told, so too do the stories of countless African Americans who have struggled in other ways, for many generations, to construct elements of a more just social order. Those elements include schools and colleges, churches and hospitals, businesses and banks, economic cooperatives and associations of mutual aid, along with entirely new patterns of community life, new cultural forms, and new artistic expressions—all of which value Black lives. These endeavors have entailed heroic struggle under the most oppressive conditions, and these protagonists have contributed as much to the empowerment of African Americans as have contentious campaigns of nonviolent resistance. Indeed, these constructive struggles endowed the African American community with many of the material, social, and organizational resources that made campaigns of nonviolent resistance possible.[6]

Likewise, the stories about Indigenous struggles for justice that tend to circulate most widely on this continent tend to be stories such as the armed standoff of American Indian Movement activists at Wounded Knee, South Dakota, in 1973; or the armed standoff of Mohawk activists in Oka, Quebec, in 1990; or nonviolent protests against oil pipeline construction through Indigenous lands in North Dakota and British Columbia in recent years. In contrast, stories rarely circulate about the many ways Indigenous Nations across the continent are, at various paces, constructing new systems of governance, law, education, health care, and natural resource management.[7] In many

6 For two excellent examples of recent scholarship on African American constructive agency, see Jessica Gordon Nembhard, *Collective Courage: A History of African American Cooperative Economic Thought and Practice*; and Monica White, *Freedom Farmers: Agricultural Resistance and the Black Freedom Movement*.

7 Refer, for example, to Jody Wilson-Raybould, *From Where I Stand: Rebuilding Indigenous Nations for a Stronger Canada*; Paul Boyer, *Capturing*

cases, these constructive and resilient expressions of collective agency are based on spiritual principles and traditional practices that were assaulted under colonialism, survived, and are now being adapted to new social conditions.

In sum, stories of constructive resilience—among Indigenous peoples, within the African diaspora, and among many other marginalized populations – have been widely ignored until quite recently. Stories of this nature now need to be widely told, to enrich our understand of the past and present, and to expand the horizon of possibility in the future.

One insight we gain from such stories is that radical constructive agency in the face of oppression, just like contentious agency in the face of oppression, is frequently met by acute acts of violent repression. This should not be surprising. When people work to construct elements of a more just social order, those who benefit from the old order will notice. Among those who benefit from the status quo, remarkably, some will experience a moral awakening and support the cause of justice. Others will attempt to defend the status quo by repressing the struggle for change—even when that struggle is pursued through entirely constructive means. In the face of such repression, *resilience* is an essential characteristic of sustained movements for social change.[8]

The constructive struggle of African Americans has repeatedly encountered such repression, as in the 1921 destruction of the prosperous Greenwood district in Tulsa, Oklahoma, and the massacre of its residents; or the destruction, two years later, of the prosperous town of Rosewood, Florida, and the massacre of its residents. More broadly, the resurgence of organized racism following the brief period of postbellum Reconstruction—a resurgence that included the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, the systematic disenfranchisement of Black voters, the passing of Jim Crow segregation laws, and the spread of lynching as a form of intimidation and social control—is an expression of this same dynamic.

When we examine, in this context, the constructive agency of the African American community, we can appreciate the profound resilience that community has shown over many generations. And as we do this, we can begin to seek out, recognize, or listen to other expressions of constructive resilience throughout history. Think, for instance, of the earliest Christian communities. As those communities focused on the construction of radically new, and more just, patterns of community life, they experienced brutal repression that was sustained for generations. In the face of such repression, their radical

Education: Envisioning and Building the First Tribal Colleges; and Clint Carroll, *Roots of Our Renewal: Ethnobotany and Cherokee Environmental Governance*.

8 For a discussion of *resilience* in nonviolent movements, see Kurt Schock, "The Practice and Study of Civil Resistance."

constructive agency required powerful forms of resilience.

The story of the Bahá'ís in Iran, alluded to above, is another story of radical constructive agency and resilience that expands our social imaginary. It also invites us to consider where this constructive resilience comes from and what sustains it.

In this regard, Bahá'ís believe that recognition of the oneness of humanity is the primary spiritual and social challenge of this age and that justice must become the central organizing principle of a new social order derived from this recognition. Toward this end, Bahá'ís are committed to a twofold process of social change that includes the transformation of hearts and minds as well as the transformation of social norms and structures. They seek coherence between the means and ends of social change. They adopt a long-term perspective on change which calls for perseverance in a multi-generational struggle. They have faith in humanity's long-term capacity for justice. They employ a conception of power rooted in capacity building and focused on the application of spiritual principles to systematic processes of social transformation. They recognize that efforts to pursue meaningful social change will often be met by hostility and repression, and they accept that the pursuit of change thus requires sacrifice and resilience.

For instance, the Bahá'í community has been constructing a radical new form of governance by which it organizes its affairs through elected assemblies at local, national, and international levels. Bahá'í elections, in which voters have true freedom of choice, are entirely free of competition and its trappings of partisanship, money, ego, and self-interest. In Iran, women and men have served side by side on elected assemblies despite cultural prohibitions against such a practice, even as Blacks and Whites did in the U.S. South under Jim Crow segregation or in South Africa under apartheid, and as members of all castes do in cultures that perpetuate the caste system. This administrative order has frequently been attacked, and it has been temporarily dismantled by some repressive governments, including the current Iranian regime. Nonetheless, globally, the project of constructing a more just and viable model of governance continues undeterred. And when conditions change in Iran, which they eventually will, Bahá'ís will resume this aspect of their constructive work in that country. In the meantime, in Iran, Bahá'ís continue to channel their energies into other aspects of their constructive work.

Or consider the experience that prompted the 2007 letter from the Universal House of Justice quoted near the beginning of this essay. In recent decades, Bahá'ís have been denied access to higher education in Iran as part of the current regime's policy to block the progress of the community. In response, Bahá'ís constructed a decentralized university, the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE),

in Bahá'í homes and offices across the country. BIHE now offers over one thousand distinct courses within five associate degree programs, eighteen baccalaureate degree programs, and fifteen graduate degree programs ranging across the arts and sciences. Faculty, staff, and students are occasionally arrested and imprisoned, and university materials are confiscated in raids. But the Iranian regime has been unable to destroy BIHE because of its decentralized and resilient nature. The regime is also unable to marshal any moral or legal argument in support of its efforts to destroy the university because of BIHE's purely peaceful and constructive nature. This is yet another expression of constructive resilience.

These stories are recounted not to valorize the struggles of any given people relative to the struggles of others, but to bring to light new insights in ways that expand our social imaginary. Another of these insights emerges as we return to a comparison of constructive and contentious agency.

Contentious nonviolent tactics, such as civil disobedience in the face of unjust laws, are intended, in part, to set up a moral dilemma within a population. In the face of the dilemma, those who benefit from unjust laws must choose to either support or repress the movement for justice. When repression occurs, it often attracts the moral sympathies and support of previously complacent bystanders and third parties, while galvanizing the will of the oppressed to advance the struggle. This is a well-understood principle in the theory and practice of nonviolent social change, purposefully applied in campaigns of civil disobedience.[9]

Radical constructive struggles, on the other hand, don't seek to publicly provoke moral dilemmas of this kind. Yet similar outcomes can still result. When constructive struggles are met with repression, this too can attract the moral sympathies and support of previously complacent bystanders and third parties while galvanizing the will of those engaged in the struggle.

This principle is illustrated clearly by the Bahá'í community in Iran, which has encountered a genocidal campaign of repression from its inception, yet has continued to grow and advance in a resilient manner, giving rise to a global movement attracting the support of an ever-expanding cross-section of humanity now engaged in radical constructive work in every country.

Every wave of repression Bahá'ís have encountered in Iran has tended to increase awareness of, sympathy for, and interest in the Bahá'í Cause—both within Iran and around the world. For instance, in recent decades, as the Iranian authorities have implemented increasingly desperate measures to repress Bahá'ís, the wider population of Iran has become increasingly willing to defend Bahá'ís and increasingly attracted to the Faith. Indeed, far more

9 See, for instance, Gene Sharp, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*.

Iranians are now identifying as Bahá'ís than at any time in the history of that country, even though becoming a Bahá'í is now considered by the regime to be a crime of apostacy punishable by death.[10] As a result of these dynamics, many Bahá'ís in Iran have been galvanized to new heights of consecrated action.

Another insight that emerges as we compare constructive and contentious approaches to transformative change is the essential role that learning and training play in both. Among nonviolent resistance scholars and activists, it is now well understood that contemporary movements can learn from past movements, even as they generate new knowledge and insight within their own social contexts, which can in turn contribute back to the collective store of knowledge that future movements are able to draw on. Indeed, there is an entire academic field now focused on "social movement learning," along with activist journals and websites devoted to this theme.[11] In addition, it is well understood that movements are most effective when such knowledge is imparted to their participants through systematic forms of training, which mobilize people to take creative initiatives within a shared framework of activism. Again, a growing body of academic and activist literature has been examining this theme.[12]

All these processes could be seen, for instance, when leaders of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement began adapting insights from Gandhi's nonviolent movement in India to their own struggles, even as protagonists of the U.S. struggle continued generating new insights while developing corresponding systems for training movement participants. Today, such processes are playing out globally through myriad movements of nonviolent resistance, linked to a growing body of literature on nonviolent praxis, promulgated through centers of nonviolent training that are multiplying in formal and informal spaces and online settings.

The radical constructive agency of the worldwide Bahá'í community is advancing through a parallel dynamic that intersects with these other processes. Drawing on a century and a half of its own experience, as well as on

10 For evidence of these claims, refer again to Karlberg, "Constructive Resilience."

11 Refer, for instance, to Maria Isabel Casas-Cortés, Michal Osterweil, and Dana Powell, "Blurring Boundaries: Recognizing Knowledge-Practices in the Study of Social Movements"; and Laurence Cox, "Movements Making Knowledge: A New Wave of Inspiration for Sociology?" See also the activist journals *Reflections on a Revolution*, and *Interface: A Journal for and about Social Movements*.

12 Refer, for example, to Larry Isaac, Daniel Cornfield, Dennis Dickerson, James Lawson, and Jonathan Coley, "'Movement Schools' and Dialogical Diffusion of Nonviolent Praxis: Nashville Workshops in the Southern Civil Rights Movement"; and Mark Engler and Paul Engler, *This Is an Uprising: How Nonviolent Revolt Is Shaping the Twenty-First Century*.

accumulated bodies of knowledge and experience beyond the Bahá'í community, Bahá'ís have developed a network of training institutes in every region of the world that prepare and mobilize people to take creative initiatives within a shared framework of activism. This decentralized system makes available an accumulating global body of experiential knowledge, even as its local participants continually contribute new insights to that growing body of knowledge. In addition, Bahá'ís are increasingly drawing on this body of knowledge as they participate in, and contribute insights to, wider discourses on social change.

Yet another insight worth noting is the way stories of constructive resilience imbue the concept of "resistance" with new meaning. Within the narrative of contentious agency, resistance is what movement activists engage in, in response to oppressive social forces. But within the narrative of constructive agency, resistance is what the constructive movement encounters from those defending the status quo. In other words, within the latter stories, creative movements for a more just social order are the streams and rivers of historical progress. Those who try to obstruct such currents of progress constitute the resistance—like obstinate stones in the path of a river.

This insight emerged through conversations on constructive resilience at the Highlander Center, alluded to above. The same insight was articulated independently, shortly after that gathering, by Michelle Alexander, a prominent voice in the U.S. struggle for racial justice. In a *New York Times* opinion piece titled "We Are Not the Resistance," she acknowledges the role of resistance in struggles for social justice, but she cautions, "Resistance is a reactive state of mind. While it can be necessary for survival and to prevent catastrophic harm, it can also tempt us to set our sights too low." Elaborating on this theme, she explains:

> Those of us who are committed to the radical evolution of American democracy are not merely resisting an unwanted reality. To the contrary, the struggle for human freedom and dignity extends back centuries and is likely to continue for generations to come. In the words of Vincent Harding, one of the great yet lesser-known heroes of the Black freedom struggle, the long, continuous yearning and reaching toward freedom flows throughout history "like a river, sometimes powerful, tumultuous, and roiling with life; at other times meandering and turgid, covered with the ice and snow of seemingly endless winters, all too often streaked and running with blood." Harding was speaking about Black movements for liberation in America, but the metaphor applies equally well to the global struggle for human dignity and freedom. (Alexander)

"Every leap forward for American democracy," she continues, "has been traceable to the revolutionary river, not the resistance." "Another world is possible," she concludes, "but we can't achieve it through resistance alone."

These social dynamics alluded to by Michelle Alexander, above, derive from basic expressions of the human spirit. The aspiration to contribute constructively to the betterment of the world is one of those. So, too, is the quality of resilience in the face of adversity. And we can see both manifest in myriad ways, in countless individuals past and present. In this sense, while constructive resilience can be a characteristic of entire movements, it is also a quality of the individuals who advance those movements. Thus, the story of constructive resilience is also the story of individuals.

I grew up hearing a story about my great-grandmother, Bina Mae Collins, who was born and raised in Springfield, Illinois, in the 1890s. Her father was a coal miner with eleven children, so she did not come from a family of means. She had little formal education. Given that Illinois had only abolished slavery in 1848, she saw the ongoing violent racism of her times, including a lynching she witnessed as a child and the 1908 massacre of Springfield's Black residents. She married a man who turned out to be a compulsive gambler and, as a result, she struggled to raise her own daughters in conditions of ongoing poverty. She also learned that her husband, like so many White men of his generation, was a closet member of the Ku Klux Klan.

But Bina Mae was a woman of faith whose reading of the Bible centered on living a virtuous life and enacting the social-justice gospel. She sent her husband packing. She opened her home to Black residents of her town. When she traveled south of the Mason-Dixon line, she rode in the back of the bus to express solidarity with Black folk. These were not popular things for a White woman to do at that time. She likely paid a price. Given her hard-scrabble background and the many challenges she faced throughout her life, she was clearly a resilient woman.

Bina Mae helped raise my mother and imparted these values to her. When my mother came of age during the turbulent 1960s, she aligned herself with the Civil Rights and Antiwar Movements. While pregnant with me in the late sixties, she began attending meetings to learn about the Bahá'í Faith, which she embraced and told her grandmother about. Upon hearing this, Bina Mae remembered 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Chicago half a century before, in 1912. Bina Mae must have read an article at the time, in an Illinois newspaper, about His visit. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's teachings about the oneness of humanity resonated with her to the extent she would remember His visit so many decades later.

Bina Mae also helped care for me when I was young. She passed away when I was six, and she figures in some of my earliest memories. The stories

my mother told about her shaped my social imaginary. Along with her resilience, Bina Mae tried to contribute constructively, in the ways she could, to bending the moral arc of the universe toward justice. Her story helped shape my early imagination about who I was and what I could do. The stories of nonviolent social movements I later heard, including my mother's support for those causes, further expanded my imagination, enabling me to envision what was possible through organized collective struggle. The stories of radical constructive agency I have since sought out have further expanded my imagination, enabling me to envision other means of organized collective struggle.

If we hope, one day, to transcend the culture of contest that has been imposed by Western modernity—a culture that has inflicted untold suffering on humanity and is now liquidating the environmental security of future generations—it seems to me that we need to find, tell, and become protagonists in many more stories of radical constructive agency and resilience. To build a new world, we need to expand our constructive imaginary.

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The Greatest Name
M. BUNCH WASHINGTON

Why Constructive Resilience?
An Autobiographical Essay

MICHAEL L. PENN

Introduction

I was born in a small house that had been built by my uncles on a rocky and barren piece of land that my grandmother acquired by saving the meager wages that she earned cleaning White folks' houses in North Carolina. Since the land was not fertile, we could not grow upon it anything to eat. In addition, because the land was not yet connected to the city, there was no running water, no electricity, and no inside toilet. We went to the bathroom in an outhouse located down the road.

One day, through our good fortune, a school bus crashed in a ditch on my grandmother's property. When the city did not tow the wreckage away, my mother told my uncles to right the bus, remove the seats, and make it our new home. We lived in that bus for a few years until a city official came by and pronounced the bus "unfit for human habitation." He said that we had to move, and that we had to move immediately. Since our family had grown in number, we could not move back into my grandmother's little house. And so, my mother packed our bags, took a few chicken sandwiches that my grandmother had prepared, and loaded the four of us onto a Greyhound bus that took us to New York. In this way, were we part of the mass migration of Negroes from the South.

In the Bedford-Stuyvesant neighborhood of New York, where we lived, there were no Whites. All of my neighbors were either Black or Puerto Rican. We were a close neighborhood. And although there were gangs and occasional murders on the block, we were closer to one another than I have ever been with any people. We were bound together by racism, which kept us out of other neighborhoods, and by our poverty, which made us rely on one another.

When I was in the third grade, for example, two children from my school would show up at our door at about 7:30 every morning during the week. They would ring the bell, we would let them in, and they would go sit in the living room, waiting for us to go to school together. My mother always invited them to breakfast, an offer they never turned down. Years later, one of these boys—by then a young man—told me that the meal that he and his brother had at my house was their only meal. He said that without us, they would have had to go to school and, in his words, "be hungry all day."

At another time, a man stopped by our house while we were sitting on the stoop. He asked my mother if she had some food because he was hungry. At that time my mother had only one can of pork and beans left for her six children, but she felt compassion for the

man and invited him in to share that meal. When the man left, he said to my mother, "For as long as you live, you will never have to worry about feeding your children again." My mother said that he had been an angel, sent to us "unawares." What was remarkable is that from that day forward, our family always had food. And so, we were close in my neighborhood because we really needed both the Lord and one another. I also suspect that we shared in the way that we did because there were habits that had been developed by the slaves that were still in our repertoire. And although we did not have the words for it at the time, we knew something about constructive resilience.

Every summer, my mother would put us all on the bus and send us back to the South to be with my relatives. As a curious, bothersome child, I took the chance to speak with many old Black folks who were very close to the days of slavery. I quite naturally wanted to know how they survived those days. One day, I learned that the slaves used to recite what sounded to me like a poem. It went:

> A charge to keep, I have; a God to glorify—who gave His love my soul to save, and fit it for the sky. To serve the present age, my calling to fulfill. O may these all my powers engage to do my Master's will.

They would also sing this in a call-response style in the little Baptist Church that we would attend on Sundays. The song was always led by the oldest members of the community. They were not good singers, but the sound of their voices would move our tender hearts and we would begin to cry.

My grandparents told me that many of the slaves believed that each soul has a destiny, that each soul is held in the hand of God and that each has a role to play. They said that if we lived our lives with as much honor and dignity as possible, given our circumstances, that we would reap the harvest of this life—that we would gather the fruit of human existence. And so, although my relatives were poor and uneducated, they were also philosophers who understood some very important things about life. They had access to some of the profound truths that animate what I understand to be constructive resilience.

When I was in the eighth grade, my teacher, Ms. Maria Paul, told me to appear promptly at her office after school. "Don't be late," she said, adding that I should also bring my friend, Michael Bivens. When we arrived, she asked us if we knew what the word "detrimental" meant. We did not. She taught us the definition, and then gave us about twenty other words to learn that day. Our instructions were to come back the following day to learn another set of words. Again, she emphasized that we should not be late.

For a year, Ms. Paul—the only White person with whom I had been

closely related as a child—would teach me and my friend words from a book called *Eighty Ways to Words of Wisdom*. At the end of the year, she asked us if we would like to go to boarding school in New England. We said that while we didn't know anything about boarding school, we would go if she recommended it.

And so, in the fall of 1973, my friend and I headed to boarding school in New England. In this way did Ms. Paul "make a way out of no way" and give us both a future that we could never have had otherwise. Years later, after I had completed my PhD and Michael Bivens had become an executive for the Coca-Cola Company, we went back to New York and found Ms. Paul living in Long Island with her mother. We treated her to dinner because we wanted to thank her for what she had done for us. When we asked her why she had done these things, she said simply that she was "a teacher" and "that is what teachers do." Like my relatives in North Carolina, and like the neighbors on my block, Ms. Paul knew something about constructive resilience. She joined in the practice of it by laboring, quietly behind the scenes, to remedy the deficits that she knew would prevent many economically impoverished children like Michael Bivens and me from realizing more of our potential.

After high school, I joined the U.S. Navy and became a navigations petty officer aboard a ballistic missile submarine. And although our ship's homeport was in the north of Scotland, as we neared the end of my time in the service, we took the submarine to a port in South Carolina for renovations and repairs. One night my crewmates and I went dancing. This occurred in the late seventies or early eighties, and I was one of only a handful of African American submariners at the time.

Unmindful of the problems that might be associated with race, my crewmates had elected to go to a dance hall that played country and western music and taught line dancing. And although I felt quite out of place, after they had been dancing for a while, I sheepishly joined them. Just when I had relaxed a bit and had begun to enjoy myself, a small group of White men surrounded me and asked what a "n . . . like me" was doing in that place. They said that I should "get the f… out," and their words, coming as they did after I had begun to imagine that I had been accepted, dismantled my naïve optimism and rendered me dazed and disoriented. With my heart pounding and my mind in disarray, I made it to the street and returned to the ship.

That experience really hurt me. I had been living in what one early scholar in the field of racial identity development called the "pre-encounter" phase of racial identity consciousness.[1] I had been thinking that we are all the same, and that all of the differences between us

1 See, William E. Cross Jr. "The Negro to Black Conversion Experience: Towards a Psychology of Black Liberation."

are superficial. In this phase, the Black American is not yet fully aware of how powerful, violent, and grotesque racism can be. Once its ugly face flashes before you, in much the way that monsters might appear in dreams, the heart is made angry or afraid. If it is to recover its capacity to love in the land of "race relations," one will have to have practice in constructive resilience.

When I was an undergraduate in college, I had dreams that I was soon to meet my wife. These dreams occurred regularly for many months. In my dreams, I could never see her face because she was ever shrouded in light, but I knew that she was a woman of purity and goodness.

When I finally encountered Kathy while standing at the sink at a friend's house, I turned to her and said, "We should go out sometime." She replied, "Yes, we should go out today." Everyone present was as surprised as I was at how our deeply intimate encounter appeared to unfold without premeditation. And although I did not want to have to face the trial of an interracial relationship, on the very first day that I met her, I had the sense that we would be married.

When I learned that she had two children who were six and seven years old, I proposed that we should all go to the Science Museum; and so we did. On the way home, I remembered my dreams and told Kathy that I thought that we were going to marry. She replied, "Maybe." That same night, after speaking together on the phone for many hours, we were engaged.

After we were married, I learned that Kathy's family had not had much experience interacting with Black people. In fact, her grandfather, Charles, told her that I could not enter his house. Since my wife and her two children had been having breakfast at their grandparents' home every Sunday for many years, I did not want my presence in the family to disrupt their bond. This meant that each Sunday morning I would have to drop them at Charles' and return to pick them up a few hours later. Kathy, who was very spiritual, very pure and noble minded, would say to me, with the most tender of hearts, that I should not worry, that he would change.

Sure enough, four years after we were married, Charles called me on the phone. He said that he was very sorry about the way that he had treated me, that I was a wonderful person and that he hoped that I would forgive him. He wanted to send me a wedding present. A few days later, a table and four chairs arrived at our house. From that day onward, I would have breakfast with him and the rest of the family at his home. Just before he died, I was living in Switzerland on sabbatical. He wanted to know, "Where is Michael?" My wife said, "Michael is in Switzerland." He wanted me to know that he loved me.

My wife—like my relatives in North Carolina, my neighbors in Brooklyn, and my teacher Ms. Paul—knew something about constructive resilience. What I perceive in Kathy is the intuition that the manifestation of good

qualities in circumstances that are harsh and inimical to them can move and transform the human heart. Indeed, it was not easy for either of us to manifest kindness and respect as her grandfather acted in racist ways. His change of heart, coming as it did in the late evening of his life, was—to each of us—a kind of miracle. In this way did the whole episode reveal more about the nature and power of constructive resilience.

When I was a professor living in Switzerland, I met the mathematician and philosopher Professor William S. Hatcher, whom I called "Hatcher" and everyone else called "Bill."

Hatcher was a White American, and he became my mentor and closest friend. Everyone who knew him, or who read his work, whether in philosophy, religion, or mathematics, knew that Hatcher had a brilliant mind. He was so brilliant that, sometimes, when I listened to him speak, the molecules in my body would begin to vibrate and I would start to sweat from the sheer excitement generated by his ideas. And as much as he was brilliant, Hatcher was also kindhearted, thoughtful, and generous. He was a philosopher who lived out his profound Bahá'í beliefs.

In one of his seminal works, *Love, Power, and Justice: The Dynamics of Authentic Morality*, Hatcher noted that the great moral challenge facing every human person is to enter into proper relationship with other living beings. This challenge is especially difficult, he noted, when we seek to enter into morally authentic relationships with those who either wittingly or unwittingly oppress, degrade, and dehumanize us. To be in proper relationship, he noted, is to relate to others in such a manner as to maximize the possibility that they will be able to "come forth," that because of their association with us, even our oppressors might have the chance to become more of what they are capable of becoming. And although the words for it did not exist at that time, as I think of it now, it seems that the approach to social change that Hatcher advocated was in harmony with the notion of constructive resilience.

The murder of Mr. George Floyd by a Minneapolis police officer on Memorial Day in 2020 made it difficult to think of constructive resilience. The coroner's report said that Mr. Floyd's death took eight or nine minutes. During several of those minutes he said that he could not breathe. When he could no longer speak for himself, some African Americans who were watching nearby pleaded with the officer on his behalf. The officer was unmoved. He continued to calmly press his knee into Mr. Floyd's neck until he was dead. When the ambulance arrived, Mr. Floyd's lifeless body was rolled onto a gurney and taken away. No one attempted CPR.

Mr. Floyd's death sent many of us, both Black and White, into mourning and deep sorrow. Others were enraged. In the wake of these experiences, we

wondered, again, whether the soul of America could be saved; and if it could be saved, we wondered, again, about how this might be accomplished.

Hatcher would always say, both in his talks and in his written works, that if the nation is to be saved it will require the coming into being of a "new race" of men and women who can work closely together, over long periods of time, in order to nurture the practice of love and justice. Because Hatcher had been born a Southern White man, and yet embodied so much genuine love and respect for people of color, it seemed to me that what he had been suggesting was in the realm of possibility.

A few weeks before he died, Hatcher said that I should visit him in Canada. I replied that I could not go to Canada because my passport was at the embassy awaiting a visa that would allow me to travel to China. He insisted that I should go to the airport, buy a ticket, and fly to Canada—and so I did. At the airport I was advised that without a passport, border security was likely to send me back to the States. I said that I would take my chances.

When I arrived at the passport check in Toronto, I told them that I did not have my passport but that I had been "summoned" to Canada by my mentor, Professor William S. Hatcher. The officer asked me for Hatcher's phone number and called him. Hatcher confirmed that he had, indeed, summoned me to Canada; and so they welcomed me in.

After three days, on the eve of my departure, Hatcher came into my room and sat on the floor beside my bed. It was very powerful to have such a monumental figure sitting on the floor in that way. He asked me, three times in succession, whether I was "willing to sacrifice." Each time, I replied that I was, indeed, willing to sacrifice. Then he declared "you cannot achieve anything great in this life unless you are willing to sacrifice." When he had completed his brief discourse, he rose, went to the door, and said that he loved me. I responded, "I love you too." On my way to China some time later, my phone quivered and I read the message that Professor Hatcher had died. I realize now that the sacrifices of which he spoke were those that are necessary in order to serve the needs of the world. He wanted me to exercise constructive resilience.

While I am not sure that I fully understand the nature of it, I have, in my life, seen many beautiful examples of constructive resilience. The Universal House of Justice writes of its features in its letter to the Bahá'í students of Iran who were forced to suffer "disappointing and shameful" "official acts" that deprived them of access to higher education. In addressing these young friends in a letter dated 9 September 2007, the House of Justice counseled them to strive to "transcend" the opposition that they face with "constructive resilience." They were further encouraged to peer "beyond the distress" of their difficulties, and endeavor to "translate the Teachings of the new Faith into actions of spiritual and social

development." Reading such things, I sometimes think that constructive resilience may be a way of being and acting in the world that pursues social change by seeking to harvest, through the force of wise, persistent, and spiritually informed action, whatever prospects for development may be hidden in our exposure to oppression.

In contemplating its nature, one is reminded of the way that Jacob wrestled with God:

> That night Jacob got up and took his two wives, his two female servants and his eleven sons and crossed the stream, he sent over all his possessions. So Jacob was left alone, and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he could not overpower him, he touched the socket of Jacob's hip so that his hip was wrenched as he wrestled with the man. Then the man said, "Let me go, for it is daybreak." But Jacob replied, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." The man asked him, "What is your name?" "Jacob" he answered. Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with humans and have overcome." (Genesis 32:22–28)

Jacob demonstrates constructive resilience when he refuses to end this encounter without reaping a harvest. He insists on gathering some fruit. Indeed, as the myth of Sisyphus suggests, the most absurd thing is to suffer for nothing—to suffer and have no chance of deriving any benefit. Those who practice constructive resilience, like Jacob and the Bahá'í students of Iran, are seeking to take from their suffering some kind of blessing, some manner of benefit. And while this cannot always be realized, constructive resilience appears to be grounded in the conviction that many forms of suffering contain a hidden gift, an unrealized potential, "a blessing in disguise."

In graduate school, my training was in clinical and experimental psychopathology. This is a field that has taught us much about suffering. Experimental psychopathologists try to create in the laboratory, often using animals, conditions that mimic the development of psychological disease or disability in human beings. It is a field that is most interested in understanding the conditions that lead to reactive disorders—like anxiety, hopelessness, or depression—which tend to develop as a consequence of exposure to certain kinds of stress.

A wide range of studies has shown that the experiences that generate the most terrible outcomes are stressful experiences about which subjects are powerless to do anything. These experiences tend to produce both negative mental health outcomes and problems with behavioral health that are typically manifested in high levels of aggression and violence directed against the self and others.

What is most interesting about this experimental work is that it has revealed that it is not always the painful experience itself that generates these bad outcomes, but rather the *perception* that the suffering is essentially meaningless and that the organism is powerless to do anything that would be effective to escape, avoid, or benefit from it in any way.

The typical learned helplessness experiment employs the "triadic design" in which one group of subjects receives controllable painful experiences, a second group, yoked to the first, receives uncontrollable painful experiences of equal intensity and duration as the first group, and a third group is exposed to neither controllable nor uncontrollable events. In Hiroto's classic human helplessness study, for instance, college students were exposed to either loud controllable noises or loud uncontrollable noises. A third group was not exposed to any noises. Subjects were then tested on a simple task in which noise termination was controllable by all subjects. Hiroto's findings are typical in that groups receiving controllable noises and no noises quickly learned to terminate the undesirable noises, whereas subjects previously exposed to uncontrollable noises failed to terminate aversive noises during the procedure.

According to the learned helplessness hypothesis, learning that events are uncontrollable results in motivational, cognitive, and emotional deficits. The motivational deficit is characterized by a kind of paralysis of will and is believed to arise from the expectation that responding is futile. The cognitive deficit is manifested by a difficulty in learning that responses do have an influence on outcomes when, in actuality, they do. And the depressed emotion characteristic of learned helplessness derives from the feelings associated with an awareness of one's powerlessness. Most importantly, the learned helplessness hypothesis holds that mere exposure to uncontrollable events is not sufficient to produce the helplessness deficits. Rather, subjects must come to *expect* that future outcomes are also uncontrollable in order to exhibit helplessness.

Furthermore, subsequent research revealed that the perception of powerlessness generated in one study tends to be carried into other situations that have nothing at all to do with the previous conditions. Thus, subjects exposed to uncontrollable aversive events develop a *mindset* that prevents them from perceiving control even when they are in stressful situations where control of outcomes is possible. In this way does exposure to uncontrollability lead to a way of thinking, feeling, and acting under stress that, ironically, fuels stress and maintains a sense of impotence. Thus, it would be no exaggeration to affirm that through this research, experimental psychopathologists have developed a simple, laboratory-based model of injustice that reveals its essential nature, articulates one of its proximal causes, and describes several of its psychological and social effects.

My experiences lead me to believe that the practice of constructive

resilience may help to protect those who suffer injustice from succumbing to some of these pernicious outcomes. My great-grandmother's generation was practicing it when they sang, "A charge to keep I have…" while doing the best that they could with the meager resources at their disposal. My teacher Ms. Maria Paul was practicing it as she prepared two African American children to learn what they might need to know in order to survive at boarding schools that had been populated, sometimes for hundreds of years, solely by Whites; and my neighbors drew on it to survive when there was simply not enough food available at home. Hatcher taught me about constructive resilience when he explained what is required if we wish to love others and reminded me that every great accomplishment requires effort and self-sacrifice; and my wife, Kathy, demonstrated it when she encouraged me to respond to the prejudice of her grandfather with a quality of noble patience, as through the transformative influence of qualities of character, there was the possibility that he would change.

But resilience does not only consist of the capacity to endure and survive stress; it is reflected in the powers and capacities that unfold as a result of exposure to it. In point of fact, evolutionary theory, developmental psychology, and the world's wisdom traditions converge on the view that even serious encounters with stress appear to be critical to the development of living things. Consider an example from the plant kingdom.

Some years ago, scientists developed a self-contained ecosystem that they named Biosphere II. All was well in Biosphere II except for one problem that puzzled the scientists for quite a while: the trees in Biosphere II, though growing tall, could not stand upright. After much reflection, one of the researchers was struck by the realization that in this totally enclosed ecosystem, there was no wind. He reasoned that saplings must acquire the strength to stand by resisting the wind; thus the lack of exposure to wind during their early development, he suspected, rendered these saplings incapable of supporting their own weight as adult trees. Stress and hardship are thus paradoxical—like strong winds, they may threaten a living system's health, survival, or wellbeing, and yet, at the same time, they may be critical to calling unrealized capabilities into existence.

We recall that when the trial of Socrates drew to a close and the sentence of death was pronounced against him, he did not lament. Rather, he suggested that a cock be sacrificed in gratitude to Asclepius—the Egyptian god of healing. Why did Socrates act in this way? One interpretation is that through this act, Socrates was seeking to declare that he had been enriched by his encounter with injustice, and that he had gathered an appropriate harvest from his life of earnest struggle. He thus demonstrates constructive resilience and reveals, through

this act, that he had come to appreciate a profound truth that would be declared by Bahá'u'lláh more than twenty-five centuries later: "Nothing save that which profiteth them can befall my loved ones. To this testifieth the Pen of God, the Most Powerful, the All-Glorious, the Best Beloved" (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 82).

It may be that constructive resilience nurtures hope by encouraging us to view social change as an historical process that must, necessarily, extend across the reaches of time. And while we are empowered to contribute our share, however modestly, to "an ever-advancing civilization" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings* CIX), we are somewhat protected from many sources of frustration, anxiety, doubt, and depression if we view the events of our lives as fleeting moments, pregnant with possibilities, within a vast historical process that will be carried forward by many others when we are gone. I close with this poignant assertion, made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who patiently served the world, as an exile and prisoner, for more than forty years:

> The darkness of this gloomy night shall pass away. Again the Sun of Reality will dawn from the horizon of the hearts. Have patience—wait, but do not sit idle; work while you are waiting; smile while you are wearied with monotony; be firm while everything around you is being shaken; be joyous while the ugly face of despair grins at you; speak aloud while the malevolent forces of the nether world try to crush your mind; be valiant and courageous while men all around you are cringing with fear and cowardice. Do not yield to the overwhelming power of tyranny and despotism. Serve the cause of democracy and freedom. Continue your journey to the end. The bright day is coming. The nucleus of the new race is forming. The harbinger of the new ideals of international justice is appearing. The trees of hope will become verdant; the copper of scorn and derision will be transmuted into the gold of honor and praise; the arid desert of ignorance will be transformed into the luxuriant garden of knowledge, the threatening clouds shall be dispelled and the stars of faith and charity will again twinkle in the clear heaven of human consciousness. (141).

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Curlean
M. BUNCH WASHINGTON

Views from a Black Artist in the Century of Light

ELIZABETH DE SOUZA

> All artists, writers among them, have several stories—one might call them creation myths—that haunt and obsess them. This is one of mine. I don't even remember when I first heard about it. I feel I have always known it . . .
> Edwidge Danticat, *Create Dangerously* 5

Twelve years ago, while planning the funeral service for my father, an artist and author born in Philadelphia in 1937, I found within the pages of one of his journals a phrase that caught my eye: *The Sorrow Songs*. Beneath it were the words *Steal Away*, which he'd underlined three times. I knew, of course, of the Negro Spirituals, and that this particular song was about the soul's flight to freedom, either with or without the body. Since that day, my mind often migrates back to those handwritten words, and sometimes I turn on Mahalia Jackson's peerless interpretation, and as her voice seeks heaven, I ponder the path bequeathed to me by my father.

From his earliest years, McCleary "Bunch" Washington, the great-grandson of a woman born into chattel slavery in South Carolina, kept a series of journals. He wrote in them daily. The surviving notebooks preserve in elegant calligraphy the candid thoughts of an erudite, deeply sensitive soul, keenly attuned to the tumultuous challenges of his era, ever willing to raise the call of the Beloved, and hoping the art he created would help bring forth gems of understanding that had been buried beneath centuries of bloodshed and ignorance.

He was a child of that bloodshed. But he escaped the home where dignity, humor, and spotless cleanliness lived alongside hidden abuse and humiliation. His first taste of freedom came early through the poetry he composed. Then he added color and canvas. By the time he arrived at Penn Station on a Greyhound bus with fifty dollars in the pocket of what he laughingly called his "civil rights jeans," he had studied at two prestigious art schools, agitated in the South as a member of SNCC,[1] embraced a new Faith, opened and closed a small art gallery, and begun introducing himself by his unusual family nickname, Bunch, instead of his unusual first name, McCleary. It wasn't a total reinvention, but it was a start.

Bunch was a storyteller of the highest caliber. His embellishments were masterfully delivered with great comedic effect. The tricky part was that, since he was a certified trouble magnet, some of the stories that sounded like lies were entirely factual. It was the

1 The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC, often pronounced "snick") was the primary avenue of civil rights activism for young Black people during the 1960s.

ones that felt true that you had to look out for. He was one of those people who don't try to be unique—they just are.

In his work as a visual artist, he invented a polyester resin-based medium he called the "Transparent Collage." Like stained glass, the art relies on natural sunlight to illumine the colors and scenes that dance within. Resin is famously toxic and difficult to work with. Inhaling it can cause brain damage and worse. After masking himself and ensuring a ventilated space, Bunch mixed the poisonous liquid with a catalyst, then poured it into molds to which he dropped colored dye, objects, and drawings. After several days, the liquid solidified into a panel of art that he mounted on a wooden base and placed on a windowsill. Before discovering resin, Bunch's usual mediums were oil, collage, pen and ink, watercolor, sculpture, and bas-relief. His most consistent themes were family life, the arts, and the transcendent nature of the human soul. The Transparent Collage harmonizes these variated elements into a single genre that invariably expressed the same theme: unity.

Anyone who knew the tall, slender, dark-skinned, enigmatic painter knew he was a protégé of Romare Bearden, one of the greatest artists of the twentieth century, best known for his rich, complex, collaged scenes portraying archetypal aspects of African American culture. Most of them knew about the luxurious eight-pound coffee table volume, *The Art of Romare Bearden: The Prevalence of Ritual*, created by Bunch in 1972. His passion about this project that he called "more than just a book" was immense, and for good reason. It was the first major study of a Black artist in book form, and bringing it to fruition was about as easy as convincing water to flow upstream.

Since it was released when I was two years old, and the ripple effects generated by its critical acclaim dominated my childhood and beyond, I cannot remember a time I didn't have at least some understanding of why the fair-skinned, soft-spoken man I called "Uncle Romy" (*Row-me*) was an important figure, not just for us Black folk, but for everyone, including those whose ancestors were on the other side of the whips and chains that are so inexplicably bound to America's mirage-like idea of a freedom. Today, nearly half a century after Bunch's book was released, his mentor's work is widely celebrated. Scholars have combed through the details of his life looking for any unexamined stone. Romy's own words—the books he wrote, the hundreds of interviews he granted—are abundant. And yet, in all of this, there are many stories that remain untold.

Here is just one: Romy had ties to the Bahá'í Faith that, to my knowledge, have never been publicly revealed or explored. It wasn't for lack of trying. I dare anyone who knew Bunch in life to ever suggest such a thing. It was because the person who was in the best position to illumine these ties also personified all that America has sacrificed to the "culture of contest" spoken of in Dr. Michael Karlberg's opening essay. It was because the person who

tried for more than forty years to explain to his co-religionists of European descent why, why, why they should pay attention to a book that placed the work of the most impactful Black artist of the day alongside the mystic poetry of Bahá'u'lláh, and told the truth about the plague of racism while also praising Bearden's choice to "calm and educate" with his art—it was because the person saying all these things (and I heard him say them from the day I was born until the day he died) was himself a Black artist.

Bunch Washington, his wife Judith, and their son Jesse attend "Souvenir" at the Wilhelm Bahá'í properties in Teaneck, New Jersey, circa 1972.
The annual gathering commemorates 'Abdu'l-Bahá's "Unity Feast" held in 1912 at the same location.

Photo credit: Al Burley.

Not only that, but he was six-foot-five and darker than Africa and wore a beret on his nappy head and smoked a corncob pipe and it seemed to many of these White and Persian Bahá'ís that he was sometimes angry. Most of them hadn't yet had the experiences that would have allowed them to understand why they felt so uncomfortable in his presence, especially when he raised matters involving race and the American Bahá'í community. To them, it didn't feel like they were privileging their own inherited socio-political power over any gains that might come from making more of an effort to understand the message Bunch so urgently wished to deliver. Instead, they thought perhaps this quietly intense man needed to review Shoghi Effendi's words about achieving racial harmony: "Let the Negroes, through a corresponding effort on their part . . ." (*Advent* 40).

Many Bahá'ís know this passage well. My mother is White; I have never not known it. I was born in 1970 and came of age during a time when interracial families, even within the Bahá'í Faith, and even within large U.S. cities, were rare. *The Advent of Divine Justice*, written by Shoghi Effendi, is an important and authoritative text for Bahá'ís. Among other things, it speaks explicitly about the "corrosion" of racial prejudice and calls upon all people to take full responsibility for its eradication (32). In part, it instructs White Bahá'ís to recognize their "usually inherent and at times subconscious sense of superiority" (40) and challenges Black Bahá'ís to respond with warmth

while manifesting "their ability to wipe out every trace of suspicion that may still linger" within (40). This missive was originally released in 1938 as a letter to the Bahá'ís in the United States and Canada. It uses words like "Negro" and "colored" that have fallen out of use. The pointed analysis and directives it gives, however, are anything but dated. The words are true as the North Star, a light for those who seek guidance.

Yet and still, in some Bahá'í communities in the States, there is a proclivity to overcome points of disagreement by engaging in what Lloyd Lawrence, also a Black artist and a Bahá'í, calls "the quote wars." That is, using the sacred texts to shut down what could otherwise be a fruitful consultation. This I find depressingly hilarious. It reminds me of when my two young children argue over who gets to say their prayers first.

In *Dawn Over Mount Hira*, the prolific and poetic Marzieh Gail puts forth this observation:

> The desire to be understood is common to us all. And yet no one understands us. We do not understand ourselves . . . human beings are each on individual islands, shouting to each other across seas of misunderstandings. But prayer is the great simplifying factor and a dispeller of confusion. Through our communion with God we become explained to ourselves and enabled to express our best and truest selves to others. (28)

This is what Bunch's book on Romy was about. Rather than yelling across oceans, he looked within, prayerfully. His book is as much about him as it is about his mentor. He looked within as an artist. He looked within as a Black man. He looked within as a follower of Bahá'u'lláh. In these three intertwining identities we see the convergence of many complexities, many patterns. At the simplest level, we have three main strands: Artist. African American. Bahá'í.

Artists are famously misunderstood and Black people are persistently and even murderously misunderstood. The Bahá'í Faith has been attacked by its enemies with deadly intent from its inception until today. And why? It has something to do with a distorted perception of what power is, and how to get it. The most evolved artists are those whose work helps bring clarity, allowing us to reconnect with our inner truths. Black people in America know something about that mysterious power that comes from within—how else could we have continued to rise, despite wave after sickening wave of violent repression? The immortal words of Maya Angelou raise our eyes ever upwards:

> You may shoot me with your
> words,
> You may cut me with your eyes,
> You may kill me with your
> hatefulness,
> But still, like air, I'll rise.

These are words the Bahá'ís still undergoing persecution in Iran could have written. These are words that apply to every person on earth.

On the great plantations of the South, and in the shanties of mud and wood that lay on their perimeter, and in the smoky outdoor kitchens found behind the plantation house, and in the cotton-dotted fields, a glorious and peculiar sound could be heard—the music of an oppressed people worshipping God as they toiled. With a lifetime of unpaid labor stretching before and behind them, and amidst the cruelties and humiliations heaped upon them, there rose in their chests an expression of their inner reality: one that knew freedom. Bridging centuries and kingdoms, the cadences and cross-rhythms first formed in disparate places across Africa were overlaid in and through a European language. At the dawn of the twentieth century, the great sociologist, activist, and author W. E. B. Du Bois wrote about these songs in his seminal book *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903. He wanted to debunk the myth, prevalent in film and theater as well as school textbooks, that the captives sang because they were happy. These songs, he said, were this country's first authentic folk music. Now, more than a century later, we understand that much of the music that uplifts and inspires us all originally sprang from those who were unimaginably downtrodden.

In 2016 the literary imagination of renowned poet Nikki Giovanni conjured up an old Black woman. Despite her age, she was captured and tethered to other people in the putrid underbelly of a slave ship. Her companions had different languages and customs, but all were miserable in the knowledge of their defeat. Says Giovanni:

> She had to find a way to lift them together. The only thing she had was a moan. And she moaned. That moan would become a Spiritual; that Spiritual would become Jazz; which would become Blues then Rhythm and Blues then Rap. That moan would define not only a people but the nation to which they were sailing. That moan would make those people decide that they should, that they could, live. (xi)

With notes that now ring out from every part of the globe, these songs are constructive resilience in action. Never static, they respond fluidly to meet any environment. The same song is never the same, and why should it be? It is intuitive and improvisational; it asks and answers, affirms and refutes. Like life after death, a song's finale is sometimes transformed into a fresh beginning when the chorus is born again with a new, celebratory tempo. Pieces of one song jump into another; freshly composed verses are added and subtracted like mathematical poetry. Authorship is not singular, but plural—this is the African way. Joined in song, there is a state of unity in which things work

together on their own. We are synced, you speak what I think. Perhaps this is what it means to "walk with the same feet" and "eat with the same mouth," as Bahá'u'lláh has spoken of in the Hidden Words (Arabic no. 68).

With this power, we become more than mere humans stuck within our oppressive conditions. We are active agents in our own liberation, making a way where once there was none. *Steal away,* the enslaved people sang to mourn a lost one, or to signal that the time had come to physically steal their own selves far, far away from those who claimed to own them. *My Lord, He calls me, He calls me by the thunder / The trumpet sounds within my soul, I ain't got long to stay here* . . . This is the sound of a people who have learned to locate their truest selves on that invisible map of the heart which Bahá'u'lláh has likened to a city: "Open, O people, the city of the human heart with the key of your utterance" (*Gleanings* 139:5). *Soon I will be done with the troubles of this world* . . . Mahalia Jackson's voice rises and falls like the hopes of those she descended from, reminding us how temporary this all is, all we can touch with our human hands. Ms. Jackson, whose father was born into slavery, is widely reported as having said that she sings "God's music because it makes me feel free. It gives me hope." I can't help wondering—how did these songs that began as a symphony of tears evolve into a messenger of hope and freedom?

Romy famously likened his art to jazz. He co-wrote a popular tune, "Seabreeze," recorded by jazz legend Dizzy Gillespie and the well-known vocalist and band leader Billy Eckstine. Part of what made Romy exceptional is that he found a potent visual language to express his love and admiration for the ordinary, oppressed Black people of the Americas. Because he saw their beauty, he was able to show it to other people, and most crucially, to Black people themselves.

This kind of work takes great sensitivity. If you're wondering if sensitivity is important, think about the human eye. We don't complain about protecting our eyes or giving them special consideration, we just do it. I've often wondered how this might relate to the "pupil of the eye" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* ch.78) designation in the Bahá'í Writings that is explored by some of my colleagues in this issue. I wonder, in particular, how this relates to our Black artists. What do we stand to lose by not deliberately protecting them?

Romy knew that the creative well from which all artists draw is sensitive to impurities, and that his dark-skinned protégé attracted micro-aggressions like black wool picks up lint. He told Bunch that the answer to these troubles could be found in his work. In one letter, we hear Romy counseling the younger artist about a part of Bunch's life that seemed irresolvable:

> When I spoke with you on the phone several months ago you

> were a bit upset with some of your Bha'i [*sic*] colleagues. That's all right, most of the very good artists had to keep on working, like Picasso and Matisse and Munch, to resolve in their art what they could not do in their lives . . . I don't mean that as an escape from life except that "art" is another world that alludes to life.

It is both disappointing and illuminating that the astute pen of Romare Bearden, whose images chronicle Black tradition, also recorded evidence of Bunch's friction within his faith community. My father struggled with interpersonal relationships throughout his life. Generational racial trauma, a face and body that evoked fear, an uncompromising attitude towards his work, all of these contributed. Yet none of these other conflicts are mentioned in Romy's letters, only Bunch's trouble with some Bahá'ís.

Eventually, after a particularly disturbing dispute, Bunch officially withdrew his Bahá'í membership. I was ten years old at the time. The impact this had on my family cannot be overstated.

McCleary Washington was born in the month of Beauty.[2] He most often referred to Bahá'u'lláh by the title "The Blessed Beauty."[3] He spent forty years turning a poisonous substance into a new form of beauty. Though he'd seen more ugliness in his life than most, his work radiates tranquility. He'd enrolled in the Faith as a young man in Philadelphia. His belief was a flame that spread across cultural lines, eventually enkindling his Jewish-born wife and her mother, and also Bunch's younger brother. Even his grandmother, a devout Baptist, signed a Bahá'í declaration card, citing Biblical prophesies about "twin lights" as her confirmation. For Bunch, exiling himself from the circle of believers plunged him into an ancient well of spiritual anguish that touched everything he did thereafter.

And yet he continued to create. Romy's advice allows us to see that Bunch did, in fact, resolve in his art what he could not in his life. In his Transparent Collage, the same sensitivity that caused him so much anguish is the very feature that makes his medium captivating. The swirling colors in these works shift and change with every fluctuation of the sunlight that illumines them. Like the Sorrow Songs, they are never static. In fact, when the light is low, the artwork takes on a special glow, seemingly lit from within, reminding us of how even the smallest degree of light can be transformative. In these works, Bunch has finally harmonized the three main elements in his life: Artist, African American, Bahá'í. What is left of his struggle is not a catalogue of pain, but mesmerizing portraits of light. Part poetry, part prayer,

2 Bahá'ís follow a solar calendar divided into nineteen months. Each month is named after an attribute of God, such as Glory, Power, Loftiness, etc. Washington's birthday falls in the month of *Jamál*, an Arabic word for beauty.

3 One of His many titles widely known among Bahá'ís.

they are constructive resilience made tangible.

Another hidden gem that Bunch's work brings forth can be found in a small brochure for an even smaller exhibition of his Transparent Collage held on Long Island in 1975. In it, Romy writes:

> Some of the symbols that Washington uses relate to his study of Persian Arts and his dedication to the Bahá'í Faith, a religious system founded in Persia by Bahá'u'lláh, that teaches the unity of all religions and the over-riding duty of the Bahá'ís to serve the needs of mankind. The word "symbol" is stressed because the Bahá'ís are carefully enjoined not to use certain likenesses of their Founders, nor too literal interpretations of their concepts. It is interesting, therefore, that this artist, who uses some of the most modern methods, should at the same time concern himself with such ancient values; however, Washington's concepts are seldom superimposed upon his material, rather he actually creates with them. (Bearden, *Transparent Collages*)

People interested in art, history, and the Bahá'í Faith might wonder why they never came across this reflection from Bearden about the Greatest Name[4] as it appears in Bunch's art. Few will understand the role that racism played in hiding these words from sight, just as Bunch eventually hid himself from those he most wished to be amongst.

A handful of people do understand. One of them is Dr. William Roberts, who knew Bunch for close to thirty years. Like Bunch, "Billy," as his friends call him, is African American and stands well over six feet tall. He is also a clinical psychologist who served for more than a decade on the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States.[5] In 1987, Dr. Roberts launched an independent initiative that provided a space for Black men to empower and uplift each other while seeking a more active role within the Bahá'í framework for action. Sanctioned by the Universal House of Justice, the Black Men's Gathering continued for twenty-five years, profoundly impacting lives and enriching the devotional character of Bahá'í communities worldwide (see Landry, McMurray, and Thomas).

In an interview that took place six years after Bunch's death, Billy commented on how racial stereotyping prevented many people from seeing in Bunch what was obvious to him:

> Simply being Black and male in America . . . his intensity was often

4 The Greatest Name is an Arabic calligraphic symbol for the invocation "Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá," or in English, "O Glory of the All Glorious." Bahá'ís believe that "Bahá," or "Glory," is the greatest name of God, alluded to by past religions, but not revealed until the advent of the Bahá'í Faith.

5 An elected council of nine people that guides the affairs of the American Bahá'í community.

> misunderstood for aggression and hostility . . . He was a person who walked the path of a visionary. He always saw the beauty in others, even those with whom he disagreed. He was a humble individual and he was also a promoter of justice. . . . And then of course there's his championing of Romare Bearden, and other artists . . . It's a good example of somebody who people want to call angry, but you know, angry people don't champion other people. If you're really angry, there's no space in you to honor others, to love others, to appreciate others, to value others, to pay tribute to others. Bunch was all about that.

Dr. Roberts also remarked upon Bunch's intense and "very determined" nature. Indeed, relinquishing his Bahá'í membership never stopped my father's efforts to share the Faith. Here is just one example: Romy and his wife Nanette kept a home on the Caribbean island of Martinique. For years, Bunch urged Romy to connect with a White Bahá'í named Barbara Joyce, also a painter who lived on the island. After many reminders from Bunch, the busy, famous, elderly artist finally sought her out. She in turn introduced Romy to a Bahá'í named Shamsi Sedaghat.

To be clear, Romy knew quite a bit about the Faith already. He was the one who'd first told Bunch that writer and critic Alain LeRoy Locke, often called the Father of the Harlem Renaissance,[6] was a Bahá'í. But something about this "Persian lady" who ran a maternity clinic in majority-Black Trinidad was different. Romy wrote to Bunch:

> After [reading *Paris Talks*], I felt that this Faith is one that can only be truly understood by service—by devotion to "good works." As I could see all the fervor and dedication, and love of what she was doing, on the Persian woman's face. She has a quality—a presence . . . The Persian lady said that one day I would become a B'haist [*sic*] as she saw it in my face but I told her I doubted that, at least not officially.

If you knew Romy, "not officially" was jaw-dropping. Among other things, it highlights what Hand of the Cause[7] Rúhíyyih Khánum once explained:

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6 The Harlem Renaissance (1918–1937) was a cultural outpouring from African American artists, musicians, writers, and scholars, also called the New Negro Movement, concentrated in but not confined to the Harlem district of New York City.

7 Hand of the Cause of God was a lifetime appointed position bestowed upon a small, select group of Bahá'ís by either Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, or Shoghi Effendi. This institution has since been replaced with the Continental Board of Counsellors (established in 1968). The purpose of the Hands of the Cause was to propagate and protect the Bahá'í Faith on an international level.

even people who agree with Bahá'ís on racial unity won't be moved until they see us all lovingly working together (Rabbani 2). Among the Bearden-Washington letters, this one alone is written on colorful, distinctive stationery by German artist Peter Max, investing it with another layer of singularity. After Romy's death in 1988, the letter became even more precious to the man who himself was "not officially" a member of the Faith he cherished.

In 1961, Rúhíyyih Khánum wrote to the National Spiritual Assemblies of Canada and the United States about her recent journey through East Africa. She spoke of how her experiences there had changed her perspective so completely that, in her words, she "[felt] as if [she] was living in a different mental world from before" (Rabbani 1). This trip took place after the death of her beloved husband, Shoghi Effendi. After spending weeks on end in close contact with hundreds of Africans, she reflected upon the qualities they had in common with their African American brethren. What struck her most, she said, was "the spiritual quality defined as 'heart' in our teachings" (2). She called attention to how this word appears in the Writings, for example, "'Thy heart is My habitation,' and 'My first council is this: Possess a pure, kindly, and radiant heart'" (2).

Reading this, I thought of how my father referenced the Hidden Words in his book, saying that Romy had a heart such as it described. He identified this quality as the origin of Romy's strength and power.

Before her travels to Africa, Rúhíyyih Khánum had never considered that this same quality might be common as a copper penny among Black and Indigenous people worldwide. Finally, she understood why Shoghi Effendi constantly mentioned "the 'pure-hearted' African" (Rabbani 2). She also warned that "[w]e must guard ourselves against the dry and dead intellectualism of the world in which we live!" Even on the printed page, her fervor and conviction are palpable:

> The people of the world are tired of words, words, words. They don't really pay any attention to what we say about "oneness, unity, world brotherhood" although many of them agree with this. What they need is to see deeds, to see Bahá'í communities, local and national, full of people of different races working together, in love, for their common belief. Then the spiritual force such a reality will release (as opposed to words) will bring an inwardly hungry, sad and disillusioned white race into the Faith in larger numbers. It is all there in the writings of Shoghi Effendi; we just don't think about it enough. (2–3)

I once shared this letter with a Bahá'í of African descent who is a gifted vocalist. Earlier that day, she had spoken to me about her immense love for Bahá'u'lláh and His Revelation, and

also about the believers in her community, whom she considered family. Later, when she opened up about some of the troubles she'd had with them, I found the letter, printed it, and watched her read it. My ears have still not recovered from both the volume and the emotion in her voice as Rúhíyyih Khánum's words permeated her spirit. At one point, she threw back her head and hollered with relief and validation. Tears sprang into her eyes and she dropped her head into her hands and wept.

She loved her community, she'd told me earlier, and they loved her, too. But she could no longer endure how their unconscious anti-Blackness affected her mental wellbeing. Too often, she returned home from Feast feeling misunderstood and disrespected. When she finally confessed her feelings to her Bahá'í family, what she received in response was an email containing the words of Shoghi Effendi: "Let the Negroes, through a corresponding effort on their part . . ." (*Advent*). It was hurtful beyond words. What this woman needed at this moment was not a quote about how she could be a better Bahá'í. What she needed, at a minimum, was to be heard.

This is the sorrow song of the African American believer, and it has been sung since the days of Hand of the Cause Louis Gregory—a contemporary of W. E. B. Du Bois—of whom 'Abdu'l-Bahá once said, "That pure soul has a heart like unto transparent water. He is like unto pure gold" (qtd. in Morrison 314).

While on pilgrimage in 2011, I found myself sitting on a charter bus next to an elegant, slender, sprightly White woman of my father's generation. As our bus approached 'Abdu'l-Bahá's house in 'Akka, she questioned me about my life the way friendly people often do, except she listened, really listened, to my responses. I was moved by her interest. It said more about her than it did about me. Who was she? Where was she from? She answered thoughtfully, always managing to steer the conversation back to me. When she learned I was in graduate school writing a book about my late father, who'd contributed much to the world in spite of a mental health crisis and drug addiction that rendered him homeless in the last few years of his life, she pulled out a notebook and asked me how to spell his name. As I did, her eyes widened in shock and her pen became still.

"McCleary? McCleary from Philadelphia is your father?" Her eyes filled with tears. She looked at me searchingly. "I knew McCleary, years and years ago. Such a remarkable person, so full of life and joy, such a powerful and inspiring presence." She blotted her eyes and told me she'd thought of him over the years, wondering what became of the magnetic young man with the "strong spirit." Then she said something even more surprising. "I had no idea he was an artist. I knew him as a poet."

In the days we spent together, her modesty and humility came into fuller

view. I was surprised and not surprised to discover that in her youth, she had spent time with Rúhíyyih Khánum for a project at the Bahá'í World Centre. When I told her that as a child in New York City, I'd presented Rúhíyyih Khánum with a bouquet of roses, her smile was sunlight itself. Was my father there? Yes, I told her, along with my whole family. She nodded once, then twice, as if I'd confirmed some great truth.

After returning home, my mother squealed when I asked if she remembered the name Ellen Parmalee. "Do I remember? She taught your father the Faith!" And then I recalled Dad laughing about a young lady he'd initially hoped to date, except she was "far too pure" to be interested in him that way. Mom and I marveled that out of some three hundred pilgrims, Mrs. Parmalee and I landed in the same group, on the same bus, sitting together on that first

The author presents Hand of the Cause of God Rúhíyyih Khánum with roses at the New York City Bahá'í Center, circa 1977, after a screening of the film *Green Light Expedition*.

Photo credit: Al Burley

approach to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s house. Even more astonishing: my original pilgrimage date, months earlier, had been a failure. On the big day, I lost my passport at the airport somewhere between the TSA checkpoint and the departing gate. It was one of my most miserable moments on planet Earth. And yet, had I been spared that agony, I wouldn’t have felt the sweetness of walking in the footsteps of the Holy Ones with my spiritual grandmother.

About seven years before his Lord called him home, my father urged me to read the newly released *Century of Light*, wherein the House of Justice turns its infallible pen to world events of the past century and their relationship to the emergence of the Faith. I knew the title held significance for him. Many times, I’d heard him say, “The Master has said we are living in the ‘century of light,’ and therefore, I wish to paint with light . . .”

I don’t know exactly what section of this book provided him with the explanation he so needed about his estrangement from the Bahá’í community, and also about his relationship to the institutions of the Faith that had failed to swoop into his interpersonal conflicts and deliver immediate and unquestionable justice in all the ways he wished. However, after reading this book, Bunch re-enrolled himself in the Faith after an absence of twenty long years. Come what may, he was a Bahá’í, and he wasn’t going to let “nobody turn him ’round,” as the old song goes. Certainly not when the adversarial forces came from the world, but also from within. Years later, I would understand that while Bunch was unique, his struggle as a Black Bahá’í in America was not. But neither was the imperishable bond of genuine love and friendship, unsullied by racial prejudice, that many of his Bahá’í brethren and sistren of all races shared with him over the years. This is the love that shines indiscriminately upon all who turn their faces towards its warmth. Now, each time I pick up *Century of Light*, I hear the songs of our ancestors, never static, rising and swelling, their truth and simplicity carrying us forward as we work together for our promised liberation.

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Pearls
M. BUNCH WASHINGTON

Transparent Collages: Views from a New World Order or Light

ROMARE BEARDEN[1]

Figures and objects float in the luminous depths of Bunch Washington's Transparent Collages, creations that are fascinating assemblages of textures and colors changing and expanding as the light caresses them at varying angles and at varying degrees of intensity.

In his Transparent Collages, Washington follows a long tradition of artists and craftsmen who stem from the creators of the great stained glass windows of the Gothic age. That is, artists who depend upon the sun or some other light source as a definitive part of their work.

Washington explains that in his particular method of working he pours thin layers of plastic resin into a mold; maybe five or six layers of varying colors. Usually he begins with lighter colors and builds up to darker hues, a method somewhat similar to the way some old masters use colored glazes whereby painters like Titian and Tintoretto would often paint ten or more transparent washes of oil color to achieve an iridescent final effect. Into any one of these plastic layers Washington might place some object, an African gold weight, a semi-precious stone, even a small painting or drawing. After all the layers are dry, the artist takes great care in the sanding and polishing of the outermost section. The work is then mounted, sometimes on old specially selected and well-seasoned pieces of wood or metal.

Mr. Washington said that one of his next projects will be to make creations to fit into windows and skylights. "I want to make a room glow," he said, "not only with colors shining in the window, but also with colored light as it falls across the floors and tables.

Some of the symbols that Washington uses relate to his study of Persian Arts and his dedication to the Bahá'í Faith, a religious system founded in Persia by Bahá'u'lláh, that teaches the unity of all religions and the over-riding duty of the Bahá'ís to serve the needs of mankind. The word "symbol" is stressed because the Bahá'ís are carefully enjoined not to use certain likenesses of their Founders, nor too literal interpretations of their concepts. It is interesting, therefore, that this artist, who uses some of the most modern methods, should at the same time concern himself with such ancient values; however, Washington's concepts are seldom superimposed upon his material, rather he actually creates with them.

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1 From the brochure for M. Bunch Washington's solo exhibit at the Off Broadway Gallery, April 13, 1975. A copy of the original document, signed by Mr. Bearden, is available at journal.bahaistudies.ca.

Two Seas
M. BUNCH WASHINGTON

New Black Power: Constructive Resilience and the Efforts of African American Bahá'ís

DERIK SMITH

In 1966, the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee stood in Mississippi and raised a call, "What do we want?" A resounding response poured from hundreds of voices, "Black Power!" (Jeffries 171). This was the first time that the two words came together as a public rallying cry, a punctuating symbol in political struggles in the United States. In the decades after Stokely Carmichael (later known as Kwame Ture) led that chant in Mississippi, the slogan "Black Power" became an activist mantra throughout the Black Diaspora. While the assertion that "Black Lives Matter" has moved to the forefront of the activist lexicon in recent years, the idea of Black Power remains potent. Yet our conceptions of Black Power are often limited. This is because our conceptions of power itself are limited. As the Universal House of Justice suggests, we frequently think of power as a "finite entity which is to be 'seized' and 'jealously guarded'" (2 Mar. 2013). But power can be conceived of in different ways; indeed, the Bahá'í approach to social transformation compels us to expand our conceptions of power—Black Power included. We may need to develop new images of power and Black Power especially, as we learn about how individuals, institutions, and communities can use constructive resilience to transform society and respond to social oppression—especially oppression that emerges from racism, "a profound deviation from the standard of true morality" (Universal House of Justice, 22 July 2020).

The House of Justice has directed our gaze toward a number of examples of constructive resilience. In spite of "relentless oppression," the Bahá'í community of Iran provides a potent model of constructive resilience. It has been "forward-looking, dynamic, vibrant," never submitting to "despair, surrender, resentment, and hate," while seeking to transform Iranian society (2 Mar. 2013). The House of Justice also indicates that "the same expression of constructive resilience" has animated efforts of American Bahá'ís, especially African American Bahá'ís who have labored for more than a century to transform American society by promoting race unity (4 Feb. 2018).

To sustain these efforts in constructive resilience, African American Bahá'ís have summoned a special Black Power—crafted of determined fortitude, patience in the face of hardship, and hard-bitten yet loving commitment. This power is the stuff of Black life that glints through clouds of injustice and oppression. The glimmering of this radical power doesn't look like the conflictual power that

smothers our social order, locking competing groups in endless contests, locking away resources, and locking up human potential. In their efforts to promote race unity in an American context corroded by racial prejudice, Black Bahá'ís have eschewed conflictual power to call upon "the powers of the human spirit" (2 Mar. 2013). Often, these are subtle, visually quiet powers that can be hard to see, but are deeply transformative. The untrained eye might misperceive this power and its meaning, but in the history of constructive resilience among African American Bahá'ís, we may see images of this new Black Power. To help us perceive the power of the spirit, the House of Justice has offered some direction. It writes, "Associated with power in this sense are words such as 'release,' 'encourage,' 'channel,' 'guide' and 'enable'" (2 Mar. 2013).

Release

Robert Turner stands out in the photograph that is the earliest documentation of African American constructive resilience in the Bahá'í Faith. His eyes are calm and vigilant, concentrating on the camera focused on the first group of Western pilgrims to the Bahá'í Holy Land. It seems he stands in the photo's flank, upsetting the symmetry of the other seven pilgrims—six women, perfectly arranged around Ibrahim Kheiralla, the central figure in the scene. The picture feels charged with an ambient tension—an energy strange, familiar, pushing Turner away from the group. But in the midst of this ambient energy, Turner exerts a quiet Black Power, standing resilient, beginning to construct the "door through which a whole race would enter the Kingdom" (qtd. in Gregory, "Robert Turner" 28).

Hearst Pilgrimage, 1898–89
Source: National Bahá'í Archives, United States

Sources say this is what ʻAbdu'l-Bahá told Turner—that if he remained faithful, he would become a portal of entry, channeling, guiding a people toward Bahá'u'lláh.

Not long after the photograph was taken, the man at its center would abandon the Bahá'í Faith. But Turner, the first African American Bahá'í, holding space in the margins of the photograph, would go to his grave holding fast to the faith of Bahá'u'lláh. What thoughts and emotions coursed through Turner in that moment fixed in history by the photo? Perhaps his steady eyes reveal the summoning of resilience that would bear him up as a Black man soldiering through the late-nineteenth century world. But, perhaps, in Turner's gaze we also see his spiritual connection to the strength in the gaze of Lua Getsinger. It was Getsinger (seated second from the right), the tireless promulgator of the Bahá'í Faith, the "Mother of the Believers," who had constructed a spiritual bond with Turner, introducing him to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. It is likely that she was the first to tell Turner of the Man they would meet in the Holy Land.

Encourage

Both Turner and Getsinger were sustained by ʻAbdu'l-Bahá's perfect embodiment of encouragement. His legendary love had drawn the pilgrims to the Mediterranean coasts of Palestine in 1898. Knowing only of His exalted station, Turner was abashed as he anticipated his first meeting with ʻAbdu'l-Bahá. He was employed as the butler of one of the other pilgrims, and thought it best to wait outside the gathering place. But sensing his absence, ʻAbdu'l-Bahá stepped to the doorway and invited him in. Uttering, "My Lord! My Lord! I am not worthy to be here," Turner fell to his knees, only to be drawn up into the embrace of ʻAbdu'l-Bahá, the Center of the Covenant (Gregory, "Robert Turner" 28).

What power was released in that encouraging embrace that drew Turner from the margin to the center? Perhaps Turner remembered that moment as he readied himself for another photograph—one that would later be sent to ʻAbdu'l-Bahá. In it, Turner stands alone, his body angled, looking off into our future, perhaps. He smiles with a beauty quiet and irrepressible. Turner, born enslaved, somewhere in Virginia, sometime in the 1850s, channels in his pose a tradition of African American resilience—a tradition born of innumerable acts, gestures, and glances of encouragement, shared between Black people bearing up in the midst of violently oppressive power.

Turner lived in a world that underrated the beauty and power of the tradition that sustained him. Maybe he believed that ʻAbdu'l-Bahá—appearing to live in that world—could have forgotten the grace that he brought to the Holy Land in 1898. When his beaming photograph was sent to ʻAbdu'l-Bahá, we can imagine that Turner was gripped by a double-emotion: he surely brimmed with the excited thought that the Mystery of God Himself would

soon hold his photo; but he must have also been anxious, thinking the photograph might be ignored, and that 'Abdu'l-Bahá might have somehow forgotten him.

Robert Turner
Source: National Bahá'í Archives, United States

Imagine, then, the power that must have surged within Robert Turner when he encountered 'Abdu'l-Bahá's response to his photograph. A universe of encouragement was condensed into the tablet:

> O thou who art pure in heart, sanctified in spirit, peerless in character, beauteous in face! Thy photograph hath been received revealing thy physical frame in the utmost grace and the best appearance. Thou art dark in countenance and bright in character. Thou art like unto the pupil of the eye which is dark in colour, yet it is the fount of light and the revealer of the contingent world. I have not forgotten nor will I forget thee. (*Selections* 114)

Turner, himself, would never forget his faith. On his deathbed, he continuously repeated "an expression strange and unknown"; in fact, he was going to his God with the words "Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá" upon his lips (Gregory, "Robert Turner" 29). Shoghi Effendi designated him a Disciple of 'Abdu'l-Bahá posthumously.

Out of slavery, Turner had built himself into the living portal through which a race "will enter the Kingdom." In Turner's grace-filled portrait we see, for the first time in history, the living confluence of two streams of power—one welling from the deep reservoir of African American resilience, and the other gushing from the infinitely creative Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. As these streams merged in Robert Turner, he became a fountain of light through which a new Black Power flowed into the world.

Channel

Sadie Oglesby sits calmly in the photo, her gaze inescapable. The transparent lenses of her wire-rimmed glasses amplify the sense of unwavering determination in her eyes. Like Turner, she had visited the Holy Land, and was empowered, transformed. Oglesby was a trained nurse, a champion of the Bahá'í

Faith, and the first African American woman to undertake a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In 1927, after spending twenty days in Haifa and 'Akká, she returned to the United States and asserted, "We are not the same people we were before we went away" (qtd. in Etter-Lewis 79). The photograph captures her years after her battery of conversations with Shoghi Effendi. Oglesby's historic pilgrimage was marked by repeated exchanges with the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith. They followed a pattern: he wanted to know about race and the American Bahá'í community; she would respond earnestly; and he would then emphasize the urgency of

Sadie Oglesby
Source: National Bahá'í Archives, United States

the need for race unity and the infusion of Blackness into the community.

"If we wish The Cause to grow in America, that which is the cause of so few colored believers must be removed." This was the substance of the message that Oglesby heard from the Guardian. This was the "vital" thing (281).

In her photograph, perhaps we can see the sense of responsibility that Oglesby took on after those transformative conversations—the strength of will necessary for channeling Shoghi Effendi's guidance for the American Bahá'ís. In 1938 Shoghi Effendi would concretize this guidance in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, calling upon the American Bahá'í community to recognize that racial prejudice was its "most vital and challenging issue." And he would emphasize that this problem was invested "with an urgency and importance that cannot be overestimated" (*Advent* 34).

Surely, few felt the gravity of these words more viscerally than Oglesby. Shoghi Effendi had personally expressed to her the self-same message that was enshrined in his 1938 letter to the North American Bahá'í community. We imagine that Oglesby had looked into his searching, powerful eyes and resolved to be the channel through which the work of race unity would flow. In Boston newspapers of the 1930s and 1940s we can trace Oglesby's channelling labour. Notes about her talks pepper the historical records of that era—"race amity" is the recurring theme. An attractive force flowed from her. Drawing people—Black people, especially—to the Bahá'í Cause, she constructed a foundation.

In 1935, Hand of the Cause of God Louis Gregory wrote a report about her work: "Many new faces are found

among the Boston friends, a large proportion of whom are colored. These were reported attracted largely through the spiritual finesse of Mrs. Oglesby" ("Race Amity" 11). The wonderful description of Oglesby's work as "spiritual finesse" suggests the grace of her efforts to channel the unifying message. But it also conceals the sheer labor of her constructive work, helping to build the foundations of a unified interracial community within an American social structure vitiated by what Shoghi Effendi called the "corrosion" of racial prejudice. It is likely that Oglesby endlessly called upon great reservoirs of African American resilience as she labored among those struggling to relinquish "once and for all the fallacious doctrine of racial superiority, with all its attendant evils, confusion, and miseries" (*Advent* 39). In this welter of miserable, confused evil, Sadie Oglesby—like millions of African American women—sacrificially constructed a foundation upon which others now stand. Constructive, resilient power channels through the gaze that flows from her photo.

Guide

Creadell Haley stands in the photograph, tall beside her airplane. It is 1946, and the Illinois banks of the Mississippi River are nearby. Haley had not yet encountered the Word that Oglesby channeled on the East Coast. But moments before posing for her commemorative portrait, she was guiding an aircraft through the skies above Jim Crow America, developing powers that she would soon exercise in service of her Faith. The photograph freezes Haley just after her first solo flight. It had been difficult. Blown off course, and running low on fuel, she landed in an oat field and spent the night in a small farm town (Ankrom). But beneath the wing of the single-engine plane, Haley looks undisturbed by whatever difficulties she had encountered in the air. One foot forward, she seems ready for what is next.

Creadell Haley
Photo courtesy of *The Quincy Herald-Whig*

The spirit dwelling in the tall figure in the photograph must have already known the secrets of Black women's resilience. She was raised by an aunt and uncle in the white-bread Midwest. During World War II, she was a military mechanic, earning the rank of sergeant in the Women's Army Air

Corps. Among African Americans of that era, folk wisdom taught that "the army ain't no place for a Black man." What then was the army like for a Black woman? We can only imagine the powers that Haley summoned as she navigated her time in the service. In the photograph we see an American military veteran who had been stationed throughout the country, studying its people and the arts of resilience as she studied engines. Sometime after she posed next to the airplane, Haley would head west, to California, to study music. Here she would encounter the Bahá'í Faith and study again, internalizing its verities, learning to channel the powers of the human spirit that would allow her to pilot others toward strength.

By 1968, Creadell Haley's name was among several dozen published in *The National Bahá'í Review*. That year she was one of a small group that left America to help construct nascent Bahá'í communities all over the planet. Haley would offer three decades of service as a pioneer in Venezuela. There was no hyperbole in the note that prefaced the list of pioneers that included Haley: "The entire American Community should be eternally grateful to these 47 courageous and dedicated fellow-believers" ("Time-Clocking" 4). She was among a precious handful sacrificially advancing a global plan directed by the Universal House of Justice. When we look yet again at Haley beside her airplane, and think of her departure for South America, her fearless independence seems still more remarkable. But in pioneering—"the prince of all goodly deeds"—fearless independence is only an apprentice's power; perhaps the lofty station of the pioneer is truly achieved when the power of independence blends into the power of deep connection with others, and the capacity to guide and nurture (Bahá'u'lláh 157:1).

Before leaving the United States, Haley had also demonstrated these connection-forming capacities by binding together the thousands who learned the words and melodies that she composed. As the 1960s roiled through America, twisting its culture into new shapes and shifting the tones of its discourse, Haley conceived a body of music that was deceptively simple and direct, always returning to the ideas captured in the refrains of two of her most well-known songs, "Bahá'u'lláh" and "Love, Love, Love." That was all. These songs were small temples within which groups would harmoniously gather; they became staples in the musical repertoire of Bahá'í communities throughout the world. Hearts were led toward spiritual perception while sheltered within the melodic architecture that Haley constructed around her themes. When she took up her South American pioneering post, Haley left behind her these song-gifts that helped guide the devotional culture of Bahá'í communities.

Haley's musical gifts sound as though they float from a transcendently pure heart. In the airy simplicity of her song "What Mankind Has to Learn," the earnest wish for racial

union is delivered with the lightest of touch: "There is only one race of man upon the earth. / But man did divide it and so / there's a black race, a white race. / What mankind has to learn is that there's only one race to know." The lilting melody that clothes her lyrics makes it possible to forget that these words address corrosive racial prejudice and the immorality of "the fallacious doctrine of racial superiority" (Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 39). Indeed, it seems that Haley had somehow transcended the strife and the struggle of racism even as her lyrics evoke it. But if Haley somehow flew just above the rancor of race, guiding others by her example of transcendence, we cannot forget that transcendence is the afterlight of resilience. The young Black woman photographed beside her airplane, moments after descending from skies above, surely knew all about resilience.

Enable

The group is made up of mostly younger men. Each one channels into the camera his own spirit and power. The 2009 photograph captures one small cadre of the hundreds of men who contributed to the Bahá'í Black Men's Gathering (BMG) during its twenty-five-year history. In 1987, the year of the first BMG, America was descending into its misbegotten "war on drugs"; rates of incarceration for Black men were in precipitous ascent; and violence raged in neighborhoods where millions of African Americans had been sequestered and virtually abandoned by their countrymen. Many decades earlier, but probably not long after He had embraced and encouraged Robert Turner, 'Abdu'l-Bahá warned that only "a revolutionary change in the concept and attitude of the average white American toward his Negro fellow citizen" could avert a fate in which "the streets of American cities [would] run with blood" (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel* 126). By the 1980s the change had not come, and in American cities streets were absorbing the blood of young Black men. Tens of thousands of us were dying violently each year. This bloodshed provoked a range of responses: the state built prison-cages at an unprecedented clip; the national imagination fortified narratives that vilified Blackness; and the hip-hop generation raised up a defensive counter-culture that tried to "improve society by fighting its evils" (Universal House of Justice, 10 Aug. 2018)—indeed, Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" was one of our anthems. But in the midst of all this, one Bahá'í engaged the moment with an alternative. He began constructing a network of relationships between Black men that would foster the power of resilience and help advance the Cause of God.

Each of the souls in the photograph had, at some time or another, been embraced and encouraged by William "Billy" Roberts, the founder of the BMG. His spirit seemed to channel both the seriousness of Black Power anthems by Public Enemy and the spiritual substance of songs by Creadell

Haley. He was the father of the Gathering. He understood that Black men possessed individual resilient power, but that the traumas of American life intertwined with "fallacious" racial doctrines rendered that power unrecognizable to most Americans, to many Bahá'í communities, and even to those who possessed it. Described by the Universal House of Justice as a "capable facilitator" (28 Aug. 2011), Roberts also knew that the fusion of individuals into a loving, service-oriented collective would release an unknown power. He knew that a gathering could be much more than the sum of its parts.

The Black Men's Gathering
Photo courtesy of the author

But creating the conditions that would enable Black men to collectively amplify their powers of resilience and service required spiritual finesse. The slow-healing wounds of history and the encircling dangers of living while Black layered many BMG brothers in the defensive clay of suspicion and posturing. A touch of moisture was needed to dissolve the hardness, the aloofness, the furrowed brows that were the protective shields we brought in from battles with a perverse world. It was primarily the moistening power of prayer that dissolved the clay. Rousing, collectivist prayers channeled together the Divine Word and the Black experience of modernity. Voices golden and gravel contributed to praise-songs communally and spontaneously devised in sessions that could stretch for hours. The call-and-response structures of Black worship bound hearts; the drums talked beneath tablets that were recited in numerous languages; power was released within and between the gathered men. In the photograph of the brothers, we feel the steady energy that flows between them. The image, slightly unfocused, captures us after long days of prayer.

In the early years of the Gathering, perhaps there was perplexity among Bahá'ís who felt excluded by

the exceptional assemblage of Black men. Was this arrangement admissible in a Faith that pivoted on belief in the oneness of humanity? What were these men doing in their gathering? What grievances were they sharing? These questions were quieted in two ways, the one connected to the other. Most significantly, the House of Justice, "acknowledging the uncommon circumstances" facing Black men in America, "lent its support" to the Gathering, deeming it a necessary "bulwark" for healing and empowerment (28 Aug. 2011). And in a reciprocal response to the sanctioning protection offered by the Supreme Body of the Bahá'í Faith, the Gathering demonstrated itself a generator of constructive agency. In the diverse collection of figures in the photograph, we see a few of the agents who contributed to the long record of service that unfurled from the Gathering. The style of spiritual communion that grew there was transplanted in dozens of localities, invigorating the devotional culture of the Bahá'í world; travel teachers undertook journeys throughout the African diaspora and elsewhere; pioneers set off to posts on the home front and abroad; and scores of BMG participants began serving on administrative institutions. Grievance had no role in the Gathering; service was the watchword—especially service along those paths illuminated by the encouraging Universal House of Justice.

Many of the figures in the photograph are just slightly off balance. They lean on one another, but perhaps they are also leaning into service. The photo finds us on the last day of the Gathering in 2009—with our hearts open, and our wills steeled, we're preparing for a return to the field, preparing to make good on the personal vows we'd made to carry out the plans of House of Justice, which we pored over, hour after hour. As one of the brothers once said, "There's a pledge, there's a promise—not something you broadcast to everybody—you have this desire to serve and not to squander the unique opportunity you've had to be in that place at that time, and to receive those kinds of blessings, and to go back home and not get into the field of service . . . well that would just be a mockery of the Gathering" (*Done Made*). During those days of fellowship and study, we sought to internalize the marching orders we received in the Plans. In 2011, when the Gathering was addressed by the House of Justice for the last time, we knew that the true upliftment of Black people, and the justice and unity which we longed to experience, remained far off. But we also knew that we had the means to bring on the social and spiritual change we prayed for. Bidding us to "advance" into the field, and "to conquer the hearts," the House of Justice—"source of all good and freed from all error" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Will and Testament* 14)—left us with a simple but profound statement about enabling Black Power: "The institute process is the primary vehicle by which you can transform and empower your people, indeed all the peoples of your nation" (28 Aug. 2011).

A final scan of the photograph notes that one of us holds a white rose—an offering to be left at the gravesite of a champion of service, a Black man who was the embodiment of power, whose very life was the expression of constructive resilience, born of love for Bahá'u'lláh. Just behind the assembled brothers is the resting place of Hand of the Cause of God Louis Gregory and his wife Louisa. Led by Roberts, we would process to that holy site on the final day of our gatherings at the Green Acre Bahá'í School. In the early twentieth century, Gregory and his wife, and their comrade Sadie Oglesby, led numerous race amity conventions at Green Acre. Our annual BMGs at the school, and our culminating processions to Gregory's gravesite, were affirmations of our connection to a history and tradition of constructive resilience animated by Black Power.

An appreciation of the images curated here is amplified by several ideas about the power that animates constructive resilience. This power is not specifically Black, of course. At the heart of constructive resilience is the power of the human spirit, which "has no gender, race, ethnicity or class" (Universal House of Justice, 2 Mar. 2013). If we visualize this power as a substance, it is translucent like water, taking on momentarily the color and the shape of the vessel through which it is channeled. It is essential to recognize that this power does not contend or compete with any other power, Black or otherwise. This power is infinite; it can never be accumulated, corralled, or stored up; it can only be released. As it is released and channeled, it unifies and bonds. Perhaps most importantly, when this power filters through the Divine Word, it is transformative.

The terrible facts of modern history have compelled people of African descent to develop cultures that are ingeniously constructive, necessarily resilient, and filled with power that is associated with words like "release," "encourage," "channel," "guide," and "enable." In the context of the United States, we should continually appreciate the constructive and resilient efforts of the African American friends as we learn about systematically developing the knowledge and practices that will help transform society and build up a divine civilization defined by universal love, unity, equity, and justice.

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Africanity, Womanism, and Constructive Resilience: Some Reflections

LAYLI MAPARYAN

> O thou who hast an illumined heart!
>
> Thou art even as the pupil of the eye, the very wellspring of the light, for God's love hath cast its rays upon thine inmost being and thou hast turned thy face toward the Kingdom of thy Lord.
>
> Intense is the hatred, in America, between black and white, but my hope is that the power of the Kingdom will bind these two in friendship, and serve them as a healing balm.
>
> Let them look not upon a man's color but upon his heart. If the heart be filled with light, that man is nigh unto the threshold of his Lord; but if not, that man is careless of his Lord, be he white or be he black.
>
> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Letter to Louis G. Gregory (*Selections* 76:1–3)

According to the Bahá'í Writings, the Black people of the world can be compared to the pupil of the eye, through which "the light of the spirit shineth forth." We are "dark in countenance," yet "bright in character," potentially the "fount of light and the revealer of the contingent world" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 78:1). According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "the blackness of the pupil of the eye is due to its absorbing the rays of the sun" (*Some Answered Questions* 49:5). Shoghi Effendi, quoting 'Abdu'l-Bahá, recalls that, "Bahá'u'lláh once compared the colored [Black] people to the black pupil of the eye surrounded by the white," and "[i]n this black pupil is seen the reflection of that which is before it and, through it, the light of the spirit shineth forth" (*Advent* 37).

The use of this metaphor by the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith, as well as by its Guardian, is noteworthy in its singularity. In fact, in 1996, the Universal House of Justice affirmed this in its Ridván letter to the followers of Bahá'u'lláh in Africa by writing, "Bahá'u'lláh favored the black peoples by making a specific reference to them when, as the Master testified, He compared them to the 'black pupil of the eye' through which 'the light of the spirit shineth forth'" (21 Apr. 1996). This same letter stated that "[t]he spiritual endowments of Africa derive naturally from the creative forces universally released by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh" when the African continent was graced in turn by Bahá'u'lláh (Whose ship docked in Egypt during His exile), 'Abdu'l-Bahá (Who visited Egypt before heading to the West), and Shoghi Effendi (who twice traversed the continent north to south and back, mostly by car).

Throughout my life as a Bahá'í, particularly as the child of a Black-White interracial Bahá'í marriage, and as a scholar of race and identity, I have wondered about and reflected deeply upon what gives Blackness its special station in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. I have also thought about what new insights we gain when the Faith is viewed through lenses of Blackness and Africanity, and when Blackness and Africanity are viewed through the lenses of the Faith. Deeply aware of the ways in which race is too often conflated with physiognomic Blackness—a conflation which, paradoxically, tends to make Africanity—that is, the cultural and cosmological wealth of African and African-descended people—invisible, I have dedicated at least part of my academic career to illuminating Africanity and inviting others to view the world through its lens. In the Bahá'í world, which prizes racial amity, racial unity, and racial justice so highly, indeed, elevating all three to the level of mandates, my working hypothesis has long been that a deep engagement with Africanity catalyzes the attainment of these aspirations. Yet, as the National Spiritual Assembly wrote in a letter dated 19 June 2020, "deeply entrenched notions of anti-blackness . . . pervade our society," and "[w]e must build the capacity to truly hear and acknowledge the voices of those who have directly suffered from the effects of racism." In the case of Black people, being able to "truly hear and acknowledge" requires being able to step outside the dominant Western mind frame about race and into the cultural wealth of Africanity and the African worldview.

The Cultural Wealth of Africanity

Often, the assumption is that the cultural wealth of Black people is simply the fruit of their long suffering under the racist regime of modernity—a sort of constructive resilience that Black people in America often refer to with the folk expression "making a way out of no way." And, yet, another view is that this cultural wealth is the product of an African cultural and cosmological coherence that was cemented "before contact," that is, before the colonizers and slavers showed up. A third view—and the one that I embrace—is that both of these mighty rivers of cultural wealth have merged in contemporary times into an ocean of light, power, and perceptivity in the "pupil of the eye" for the benefit of all humanity along its journey towards conscious recognition of its unity.

Rúhíyyih Khanum, Hand of the Cause and wife of Shoghi Effendi, made an interesting remark in 1961 when she wrote for *Bahá'í News*, "When Bahá'u'lláh likens the Negro race to the faculty of sight in the human body—the act of perception with all it implies—it is a pretty terrific statement. He never said this of anyone else." She continued, "I thought the American Negro's humility, his kindness, friendliness, courtesy and hospitableness were something to do with his oppression and the background of

slavery. But after spending weeks, day after day in the villages of Africa, seeing literally thousands of Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'ís, I have awakened to the fact that the American Negro has these beautiful qualities not because he was enslaved but because he has the characteristics of his race" (Thomas 183). This quote is important because it illustrates a seeing of Africanity on its own terms, beyond the bounds of Western anti-Blackness—that is, seeing humility, kindness, friendliness, courtesy, and hospitableness as endemic cultural attributes and aspects of the African ethos, rather than as products of racial oppression.

The racial hierarchy—Whites on top, Blacks at the bottom—used to justify slavery, colonialism, and capitalism, has historically been and continues to be a central structural pillar of the current world system. That simple, dichotomous hierarchy has been an engine of centuries of racial violence at once physical, psychological, social, economic, environmental, and epistemological. Thus, it is the seed form, the blueprint, the central organizing principle of today's systemic racial injustice—the very thing we are trying to undo when we are trying to undo racism. It is one of the fundamental schisms in the world order—and one which Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation upends.

Literary scholar Derik Smith, in an essay exploring the "pupil of the eye" metaphor, particularly as it illuminates the relationship between Black people and modernity, notes that "the 'pupil of the eye' metaphor is a deeply consequential, distinguishing feature of the transformative social and spiritual system laid out in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation" (7) because this metaphor "effectively positions Blackness at the epicenter of a 'bold and universal' world-transformative project" (9). Smith goes on to conjecture reasons for this centrality in Bahá'u'lláh's "wondrous System" by noting "the material reality that Black people were among the principal builders of global modernity" (9) and the fact that Bahá'u'lláh's favoring of Black people through the use of this metaphor effectively ruptured the dominant racial (racist) ideology of the mid-to-late nineteenth century, distinguishing "the world-transformative project of His Revelation from social reformist movements of the era" (10). Thus, we witness in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation a signal towards something that people of African descent in the modern era have longed for: liberation.

Surviving the long epoch of anti-Blackness—at least four hundred years in the Americas (Hannah-Jones et al.) and even longer elsewhere around the world—has required survival genius on the part of African and African-descended people. It has required suffering and sacrifice, sorrow and sublimation. It has required the ability to not become dehumanized in the face of dehumanizing conditions, to not become hateful in the face of hate. It has evoked creative genius in the form of music and song, art and dance, literature and drama, fashion and sports; it has generated scholarly

innovation, scientific invention, and spiritual expression. Arguably, the engine of this survival genius has been Africanity itself, which, far from being erased or eradicated by slavery, colonization, and their sequelae, has gestated quietly and protectively inside the bodies, souls, and communities of Black people, continually being transmitted, generation after generation. Another, more contemporary way of speaking about this survival genius might be in terms of constructive resilience.

Constructive Resilience

In a letter dated 28 February 2018 to an individual believer, the Universal House of Justice compared the constructive resilience of the African American Bahá'ís, particularly those who had been engaged in race unity endeavors, to that of the persecuted Bahá'ís of Iran. A close reading of that letter reveals that those exhibiting constructive resilience also demonstrate the attributes of being forward-looking, dynamic, vibrant, and committed to serving the larger society. Furthermore, they exhibit solidarity and collaboration in the face of oppression, transcending "mere survival" to transform conditions of ignorance and prejudice all around them and win the respect and collaboration of people in the wider community. Among those demonstrating constructive resilience, expressions of apprehension and anxiety are minimal, and their hearts are not easily perturbed by calamity; they are able to avoid despair, surrender, resentment, and hate. Drawing from immense spiritual reserves, they are able to maintain focus on a more visionary horizon. These attributes bear great similarity to the type of African-American survival genius described earlier.

Other letters from the House, most directed to the Bahá'ís in Iran, further enrich our understanding of constructive resilience. In a letter dated 9 September 2007 to the Bahá'í students deprived of education in Iran, for example, the House describes several attributes associated with constructive resilience, noting (of those who were the targets of discrimination) that "[t]hey responded to the inhumanity of their enemies with patience, calm, resignation, and contentment, choosing to meet deception with truthfulness and cruelty with good will towards all." Moreover, these Bahá'ís "attempted to translate the Teachings of the new Faith into actions of spiritual and social development" and "[t]o build, to strengthen, to refine the tissues of society wherever they might find themselves." In a letter dated 23 June 2009 to the Bahá'ís of Iran, the House states that those experiencing oppression are neither to "succumb in resignation" nor to "take on the characteristics of the oppressor." In a letter dated 27 August 2013 to the Bahá'ís in the Cradle of the Faith (Iran), the House lauds the Iranian Bahá'í community for their "calm and constructive resilience" and remaining "patient and composed under difficulties." African American history—even beyond the history of African American Bahá'ís—is replete with examples of individuals

and communities manifesting these attributes and embodying constructive resilience, and the same can be said of African peoples worldwide.

Constructive Resilience as Overcoming Cosmological Negation

One manifestation of constructive resilience that is well known to African-descended Black people worldwide is enduring and surviving cosmological negation while simultaneously clinging fast to the oneness of humanity. Cosmological negation, also known as epistemicide, occurs when indigenous (including African) cultural belief systems, cosmologies, and worldviews are overwritten by the belief systems, cosmologies, and worldviews of colonizers.[1] This psychically violent process takes place through many vehicles: schooling, the imposition of a foreign language over local languages and criminalization of native tongues, religious proselytization, mass media and advertising, the denigration of local ways of life (for example, foodways, marriage and family norms, childrearing practices, etc.), and the importation of alien value systems (such as gender inequality, colorism, individual land ownership, capitalism). The result of cosmological negation has been to subvert indigenous worldviews and lifeways all around the world, disorienting well-functioning societies and individuals, and depriving the larger humanity of valuable accumulated knowledge and wisdom from these diverse peoples. Thus, cosmological negation is a profound vector of oppression. Despite these efforts at cosmological negation, however, indigenous knowledge systems, including African knowledge systems, have, like deeply buried seeds, survived.

In *Prayers and Meditations*—a sorrowful yet hopeful accounting of tribulations and overcoming, filled with plaintive cries to God as well as worshipful litanies of God's superlative names—Bahá'u'lláh wrote these words:

> These are Thy servants whom the ascendancy of the oppressor hath failed to deter from fixing their eyes on the Tabernacle of Thy majesty, and whom the hosts of tyranny have been powerless to

1 In this paper, the term "indigenous" both affirms and departs from generally established working definitions of indigeneity, such as those implied within the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The question of whether people of African descent, especially members of the global African diaspora and, most pointedly, African Americans today are to be considered "indigenous" has been deliberated (DESA, 2009). This paper invites readers to consider the ways in which African descended peoples worldwide retain indigeneity, despite having been forcibly removed generations ago by enslavers from the lands they originally occupied and despite the vehement attempts, past and present, to erase African consciousness and culture through processes of mental and economic colonization and acts of physical violence.

> affright and divert their gaze from the Dayspring of Thy signs and the Dawning-Place of Thy testimonies. (176:4)

The first time I read this passage, it leapt out from the page for me, piercing my heart with Bahá'u'lláh's profound love, expressed as empathy for those, like members of my own group, who have suffered relentless oppression, including cosmological negation, yet who have maintained an ardent, unquestioning love of God. In this passage, I felt very seen, and I felt that all populations suffering under the yoke of oppression were deeply and compassionately seen by Bahá'u'lláh. The passage was deep encouragement for all of us.

More recently, I encountered Nayyirah Waheed's powerful poem in her book *salt*:

> if we
> wanted
> to.
> people of color
> could
> burn the world down.
> for what
> we
> have experienced.
> but
> we don't.
>
> *— how stunningly beautiful that our sacred*
> *respect for the earth. for life. is deeper than*
> *our rage.* (197)

This poem spoke to me as a Black Bahá'í who has fought to reconcile competing impulses about how best to participate in the movement for racial justice. The pain and rage associated with the unrelenting epidemic of police killings of unarmed Black people and the indefensible disproportionality of Black and Brown deaths to Covid-19 sparked fire in my heart and soul, but the love of God and Bahá'u'lláh, the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the infinitely loving service of Bahíyyih Khánum, the resolute equanimity and planning genius of Shoghi Effendi, and the inspiring guidance from the Universal House of Justice cooled the flames and channeled the heat into the enduring warmth of love, service, and obedience to the Covenant, reorienting my focus towards the unity of humankind—a unity that fully embraces Black people, acknowledges Black equality and dignity, eradicates anti-Blackness, and integrates Africanity into world culture. It is a universal consciousness of unity that has arrived only after humanity has looked through the "black pupil" and "seen the reflection of that which is before it," allowing "the light of the spirit [to shine] forth." In other words, it is a conscious unity that has decisively abandoned the practice of cosmological negation.

In the illustrations above, both the Prophet and the poet acknowledge that oppression is a fiercely disruptive force, capable of destabilizing people, of evoking paralyzing fear or incendiary rage, and, yet, both acknowledge that there is a higher power greater

than this force—a power (or Power) capable of evincing a liberatory transcendence. It is towards this power/Power that many Africana individuals and cultures orient themselves and their discourse, taking refuge in the indomitable pervasiveness of Spirit.

While constructive resilience has not been the only response of African Americans to oppression, without it, the African American community would never have survived the decimating, racially valenced (that is White on top, Black at the bottom) conditions of modernity—and the same might be said of other African and African-descended peoples around the world. The quest for nobility in the face of denigration and the pursuit of dignity in the face of assaults on Black humanity have defined the Black social movement across the centuries, reflecting the spiritually resolute demeanor and hopeful disposition associated with constructive resilience. This spirituality is inherent in the African worldview, described by upholders of the "cultural unity of Africa" thesis, as a consistent and coherent ethos binding Africa's diverse and far-flung people. This ethos is encapsulated in the African worldview and cosmology (Mbiti).

African Worldview and Cosmology

In the African worldview, as in many other indigenous worldviews, reality is understood this way: humans, nature, and the spirit world are three interrelated domains. The spirit world (or dimension) is by far the most vast and influential, and it interpenetrates the other domains. In African cosmology, everything is spiritual, infused with spirit, or of spiritual significance; spirit is inescapable. Spirit is also dynamic and replete with "aliveness"; it is a vitalizing force, but also a force with destructive potential. The spirit world is filled with beings, from the unitary God Who is "All That Is" and takes many forms, to divinities both grand and minor who are spiritually superior to humans, to Ancestors and the spirits of deceased persons, who are relatively equal to humans, but invisible in a material sense. In some accounts, the spiritual realm contains both beneficent and maleficent beings who constantly compete for the "heads" of human beings (in other words, the ability to control human thoughts and actions for their own ends), yet, even in these accounts, the beneficent beings outnumber the maleficent ones significantly. While a full accounting of the nature of relationships between humans and beings in the spiritual realm within African cosmology is beyond the scope of this essay, a major takeaway is that, for many people of African descent, the invisible spiritual realm is real, present, and always interacting with human life, in both its social and material aspects. Thus, engaging with spirit is an "everyday" thing, not a thing apart from everyday life.

Additionally, the spiritual realm pervades the realm of nature, inspiriting animals and plants and other natural phenomena (from mineral formations,

to the weather, to the celestial bodies), to the point where virtually any natural being or phenomenon can be considered a messenger of spirit or spiritual actor, both in its own right and with respect to humans. This has several implications. First, nature is considered sacred, often with its own consciousness, but, at the very least, worthy of reverence and awe. Second, humans must respect and not abuse nature, as natural "beings" are not objects to be exploited for human ends. Humans and nature must work together, and each can put the other in check. Third, nature is a source of life, whether in terms of food or medicine or shelter or simply inherent life-force. Fourth, nature is a source of signs, that is, communication or information from the spiritual world for humans to discern—information that can guide or constrain human action, providing valuable information about whether human life is in alignment with the divine order. Thus, human communities benefit when people become skilled sign-readers, as well as when people become knowledgeable about the physical and spiritual attributes of plants, animals, and natural phenomena of all kinds. With this knowledge, humans so specialized can become healers, diviners, intermediaries, and teachers, to the benefit of whole communities.

The organizing principle for human beings and human communities within African cosmology is kinship. Everyone is related. Everyone is family. Family is vast. In fact, kinship is the organizing principle of life, from family to community to humanity to the cosmos. Humans, in turn, form a community with all other beings, from animals, plants, and minerals, to forces of nature, the cosmos, and the spirit world. Kinship is the governing principle of one grand divine ecology. Within this kinship system, there are rules of right relation, based on factors such as age or seniority, gender, lateral versus vertical relationship, and the like. People tend to know (or seek to know) their degree of kinship with every other person they encounter, and this degree of kinship determines right relations. These rules of relation are designed to maintain both connectedness and social order against the backdrop of competing individual needs, agendas, and aspirations, and to ensure both justice and cohesiveness within the larger collective. Importantly, these rules of right relation can encompass elements of nature as well as spiritual entities, keeping all three domains—human society, the natural world, and the spirit world—aligned and in harmony. Such harmony is, of course, dynamic and not static.

In African cosmology, community is often thought of as an ever-expanding circle of inclusion. At the heart of it is the dyad, whether husband and wife or mother and child. Encircling (or growing out of) this dyad is family, followed by clan, tribe, and then nation, and culminating in all humanity or the cosmos. Thus, Bahá'í principles such as "unity" and "the oneness of humankind" are highly consonant with the African worldview and easy to embrace. This is one reason that womanism struck such

a chord with me when I first encountered it as a young Bahá'í college student studying at the historically Black Spelman College in 1984.

Womanism: A Gendered Expression of Africanity

Womanism, a social change perspective rooted in the African worldview and further elaborated through Black women's culturally and historically based perspectives and practices, provides another angle on constructive resilience as well as another layer of possibility with regard to how Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation advances justice and unity for all humanity by centering the "pupil of the eye." As I wrote in 2006 in the introduction to *The Womanist Reader*,

> Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in Black women's and other women of color's everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem-solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. (Phillips xx)

Unpacking this, womanism is an understanding about how to solve problems—social problems, environmental problems, indeed, not just Black people's problems, but all humanity's problems—that comes from Black culture and is rooted in African cosmology and worldview. This approach is inflected by the cultural and historical experiences of Black women, who have built up a body of knowledge and a praxis around problem-solving that has its center of gravity in "everyday life" rather than "institutions," per se. Its protagonists are "everyday women" rather than "powerful people" or "elites," per se—although womanism very much considers "everyday Black women" to be powerful people, agents of change, and, in fact, geniuses. What's more, Black women, Africana women, do not cling to womanism as strictly "their own thing"; rather, womanism is viewed as a life-saving, life-giving gift to all humanity from Black women, and anyone of any race, ethnicity, religion, or gender can be a womanist or enact womanist social change praxis. Its values, including the value placed on ever-widening circles of inclusivity, ultimately welcome all human beings into its ken.

Inherent within womanism is a set of social change methodologies, as well as a social movement logic. At the center of this logic is an emphasis on changing hearts and minds, the energetic foundation of all material and social life, and healing the world. Womanists understand the brokenness of the world because of their cultural-historical experiences of slavery and colonization, which attempted to disorient, debase, and annihilate African cultures and cosmologies at the same time as they succeeded at economically exploiting and exacting an immense

toll of violence on Black bodies. This violence included gender-specific acts such as the wanton rape of enslaved women, the separation of enslaved mothers and children, and medical experimentation on enslaved women and women in colonized countries. Smith's point, mentioned earlier in this essay, about Black people—Black bodies and labor—being at the core of modernity and all its travails is resonant with womanist understandings about the devastation that slavery, colonialism, and all their horrific sequelae have wrought on Black individuals, communities, and cultures. Many African Americans refer to this experience, especially the Middle Passage in which so many Africans died as captives on their way to America, as the *Ma'afa*, which means "terrible occurrence" or "great disaster" in Swahili.

Despite these past horrors and their current-day sequelae, from police brutality and the killings by police of unarmed Black civilians to the outsize numbers of Black deaths from Covid-19, womanists maintain that unrelenting efforts at epistemicide and other forms of Black annihilation have failed to rob African-descended peoples of their Africanity, that is, their cultural wealth, or their innate nobility. Womanists also maintain that "race," as a construct synonymous with deficit, lack, evil, and sin, is incapable of containing the cultural wealth that is Africanity. Womanists, because of this cultural wealth, maintain optimism and strength in the face of tremendous trauma and unrelenting physical, psychic, cultural, economic, environmental, and spiritual assault. The world is out of whack, and womanists continue to believe that it can be righted.

Conclusion

We cannot realize the oneness of humanity while simultaneously negating the manifold cultures and cosmologies of the earth's diverse and ancient peoples, particularly those "populations of special significance"—defined by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States as American Indians, African Americans, and various immigrant groups—who have endured the ravages of slavery, colonialism, genocide, and negation (31 Jan. 2018). By opening up new ways of seeing Black people, Black culture, and the African worldview—ways that defy and dissolve anti-Blackness—we advance the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh and accelerate the just and loving world order it heralds. The gravest problems that we are trying to solve now are byproducts of the exploitation of Black people, of the racist organizing principle at the blueprint level of modernity—a principle that codified "race" as a way to negate the humanity and brilliance of Black, African people. Bahá'u'lláh redeemed Black people's humanity and brilliance against the backdrop of that hegemonic racist system when He designated Black people as "the pupil of the eye" through which "the light of the spirit shineth forth." By reflecting deeply on Blackness as Africanity and its cultural wealth, we are opening the portal wider for this light.

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Sophisticated Lady
M. BUNCH WASHINGTON

When We In/visibilize Our Nobility . . .

SAHAR D. SATTARZADEH

> Dost thou deem thyself a small and puny form,
> When thou foldest within thyself the greater world?
> *Hadith* (qtd. in Bahá'u'lláh, *The Call of the Divine Beloved*)

Un/becoming a Victim

In October 2011, an international faith-based women's rights non-governmental organization (NGO) convened a press briefing for invited members of the United States Congress and their staff in the U.S. Capitol Building in Washington, D.C. The briefing was an advocacy initiative to address the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA)[1]

1 Introduced by the U.S. Congress and signed by President Bill Clinton in 1994, VAWA became the first form of U.S. legislation representing a multidimensional approach to strengthening local, state, tribal, and federal responses to gender-based violence and violence against women and LGBTQ+ communities, specifically relating to crimes associated with dating violence, domestic violence or intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and stalking. The dual purpose of the bill is to "ensur[e] victim safety and offender accountability" (Office of Violence Against Women). Throughout the years, reauthorizations of VAWA have provided federal grant funding to support relevant community-based initiatives; they have also resulted in a number of advancements, including, but not limited to: stronger criminal laws, housing protections for victims, extending partial accountability for domestic violence to tribal lands, and inclusion of protections for the LGBTQ+ community. Reauthorization of the bill expired in 2019, and at the time of writing this, the U.S. House of Representatives approved reauthorization, H.R.1620 - Violence Against Women Act Reauthorization Act of 2021 (www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-bill/1620/text) with enhancements, particularly for Black, Indigenous, underrepresented ethnic/racial groups, two-spirit and LGBTQ+ communities, which is currently facing obstacles in the Senate. Responding to the long absence, avoidance, and silence of governmental action regarding Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, Girls, Transgender, and Two-Spirit People (MMIWGT2S), the first-ever Indigenous person and woman of color to hold a U.S. Cabinet position, Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland (Laguna Pueblo), has also established a new Missing and Murdered Unit (MMU) within the Bureau of Indian Affairs Office of Justice Services "to provide leadership and direction for cross-departmental and interagency work involving missing and murdered American Indians and Alaska Natives . . . [and] help put the full weight of the federal government into investigating these cases and marshal law enforcement resources across federal agencies and throughout Indian country" (DOI News). On May 4, 2021, President Joe Biden proclaimed May 5 as the National Day of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Peoples Awareness Day, including his

since its reauthorization had expired that year, and therefore, was again up for reauthorization for the 2012 fiscal year. Along with three other women from diverse faith backgrounds, representing religious or interfaith domestic violence organizations and programs, I was invited by the NGO to participate on an Interfaith Domestic Violence Coalition panel for the press briefing. When I was introduced to speak, however, the last words of the introduction caught me off-guard: ". . . and she is a victim of domestic violence."

Despite having jotted down talking points in advance, suddenly, I felt ill-prepared and out of place. An intense sensation of heat overpowered my being. There was no intention to present myself as the victim on display for the event; to be honest, I had never actually shared my abusive relationship history with the conveners. The emcee of the event, a white Christian clergywoman introduced as a "survivor" of domestic violence, shared the obstacles she had faced due to a deficient, broken system. It was a story *she chose* to tell. While there was likely no malintent on the part of the sponsoring NGO, I still could not help but feel exploited and tokenized as the poster "victim" for the briefing. I never consented to such a representation. My nobility was instantly invisibilized, flanking in the shadows of my "trauma." Nevertheless, there was no running away at this point. It was my turn to approach the microphone and share my story. "Thank you for inviting me to speak about this very important issue," I began. "I want to clarify, however, that I do not self-identify as a 'victim' . . ."

The consistent frequency and weight of this gender-based "justice" vernacular was already too familiar. Even when considering the purpose of our gathering and the title of the federal law, the *Violence Against Women* Act, for example, the emphasis clearly falls on the victimized body of women, disregarding the accountability of the perpetrators of that violence. Having experienced all the predetermined stages of "Battered Woman Syndrome," while simultaneously self-diagnosing it on occasion, is another reminder of how such branding creates new, problematic opportunities for those of us who have endured abusive relationships to be systematically beaten up and diminished by ourselves and others—even if only symbolically—over and over again. It becomes a gendered burden to bear. In attempting to identify the "disease," we still become "diseased," pathologizing our experiences of abuse. Despite the shared anecdotes of victimization and trauma that may (or may not) have been expected of me at the congressional hearing, I refused to go there. That refusal was a resistance to how I was introduced, to how I was scripted to perform. Ironically, being introduced as a victim took me completely "off-script" of my own pre-drafted words; yet, it also challenged me to create a new narrative for myself.

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commitment to protecting Native communities through the reauthorization of VAWA (The White House).

Simultaneously, I had been volunteering as a "Court Companion and Victim Advocate" at the "Abused Persons Program" (titles that remain), an initiative of the county health department where I lived at the time. Volunteering for the program was a self-prescribed attempt to heal from leaving an abusive relationship (which many, I recognize, are not privileged to do, due to varying circumstances) by hoping to support others who had also experienced domestic or intimate partner violence. Among the program staff and our cohort of volunteers, I was the only one who had openly verbalized experiencing an abusive relationship, revealing a close-up understanding of how "justice" falls short. While I sensed a genuine collective desire to help those victimized by abuse, the program lacked sufficient, relevant educational and economic resources, and most importantly, it lacked any epistemic experience—or what Deer refers to as "the kind of knowledge we gain from experiencing something; a visceral knowledge that can invoke the physical senses and the genius of memory" (14)—from its targeted population, thus neglecting the insightful, vital contributions that could be shared with the program. The dichotomies of "victim" and "offender" used in the space are dehumanizing and diminish the possibility of any inherent nobility. Therefore, despite their good intentions, the program staff's efforts seemed paternalistic and surface-level at most, disregarding the diverse sociocultural contexts of the people they intend to serve. While I shared my perspectives during the training sessions, I am not sure whether anyone was receptive to them. One thing was for certain: the program and the court system only viewed us as "victims."

In such systems, we are inherently victims—before we even arrive, granting us the latitude to perform victimhood; and then, there are those unwritten codes deciphering who deserves protection, who deserves the abuse, who deserves or *should be* "rescued" or "saved," and who should be doing the rescuing or saving; this savior complex extends across many interesting dimensions and planes (Cole). Becoming a "battered woman" not only emerges from a historical, patriarchal normative script. Its imprint deepens when it becomes economized, ethnicized, geographized, Indigenized, and/or racialized, and so on, particularly when examined through the lens of colonial histories—justifying, normalizing, and reproducing diverse forms of violence against Indigenous, Black, ethnic/racial, and gendered bodies (for example, see Deer; Hammad; Hartman; Ritchie; Sharpe). This victimhood is oftentimes internalized, especially for already marginalized and underrepresented communities. Ultimately, if the oppression persists "long enough and effectively enough, you [may] begin to do it to yourself . . . becom[ing] a collaborator" (Baldwin and Giovanni 17).

For five years, I was in a relationship with a man who was economically, emotionally, physically, psychologically, and spiritually abusive towards me.

My former partner's abuse was fueled by evident preexisting insecurities that swiftly avalanched from the "intel" he collected during his frequent violations of my privacy, including reading my journal entries about my interrogations of uninvited advances from men and the details of a gang rape I had endured just a year prior to meeting him. His mother had tragically passed away from advanced ovarian cancer during the early weeks of our courtship. Coincidentally, I was diagnosed with an early stage of ovarian cancer two weeks following her earthly departure. Oddly enough, I assumed my cancer diagnosis would serve as a form of protection or shield from the abuse, perhaps an unyielding bond between us; but instead, it swiftly became irrelevant, invisible. Our relationship ended in 2009, and two years later—two months after that congressional press briefing—I was formally diagnosed with having post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Two years later, we attempted to give the relationship another try, but it had already failed the first time. The relationship was an accelerant to a lingering disbelief in my own nobility. All of my relationships—regardless of shape or form—were mirrors of a distorted reality, reflecting the neglect of my spiritual self.

To be truthful, it has taken me well over a decade to share this personal experience openly and publicly. Obviously, I am not the first to share such an account; nor will I be the last, unfortunately. Initially resistant to being the center of attention, to be centered at all, this story was safeguarded in a silent corner, hidden from view . . . until dear, beloved souls gave me "permission" to share it. The companionate words of Saidiya Hartman on being influenced by DuBois's use of memoir in *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Dusk of Dawn*—inspired by Chandler and Spivak's terminology—confirmed that this "autobiographical example . . . is not a personal story that folds onto itself; it's not about navel gazing, it's really about trying to look at historical and social process and one's own formation as a window onto social and historical processes, as an example of them" (Saunders 5). Lorde's reference to her personal story in *The Cancer Journals* as "not academic," but rather as "a piece of life-saving equipment" that "kept [her] alive during the time that [she] wrote it" (Lorde et al. 11), likewise encouraged me to reconcile and feel at ease to open up and share this story; the urge to share this *now* is simply because it finally manifested as a rupture I needed to address. And in the words of Lorde, "now it's out there, the umbilical cord is cut, it has a life of its own" (2). It is no longer "mine," nor does it belong to me.

Silence formerly functioned as a protective armor—for my own guilt and shame and for my former partner, from the backbiting, verbal abuse, and judgments projected from others in their attempts to slander his character. In addition to unlearning unjust sociocultural norms and other forms of socialization (we do not often freely speak about "these kinds of issues" in Azeri/Iranian/Persian households),

gossip and backbiting, unfortunately, had already emerged among a number of those privy to this particular slice of my life. Even in the deafening secrets and silence, I heard people talking. Aside from the desire to avoid being "exposed" to and judged by the world, I had no interest in presenting the self-inflicted image of damaged "victim" or recovering "survivor." Both "victim" and "survivor" still give way/weight to the experience of trauma, albeit differently.[2] The thought of others projecting such a negative status upon me felt disempowering. In the same instance, there was no desire on my part to trivialize or delegitimize the injustice or diminish the urgency of domestic/intimate partner/gender-based violence. Similarly, I did not wish to undermine the genuine empathy and aspirations for justice and healing they evoke. Even those secret well-intentioned "intervention" plans among a few clusters of friends deeply rooted in social justice activism, which I learned of years later, backfired in unhealthy, toxic modes, even dissolving friendships. All I desired was to avoid being (mis) represented or replicating the "danger in damage-centered [narratives] . . . [as a] pathologizing approach in which the oppression singularly defines a community" (Tuck 413), such as women in violent relationships. Tuck suggests considering desire-based frameworks instead.

My desire to seek liberation from the entanglements and fetters of damage and victimhood is neither unique nor limited to my personal experiences with intimate partner, domestic, gender-based, and sexual violence. There are extensive systems and structures in our societies where a duality of visibilized trauma and invisibilized nobility is reproduced and normalized, particularly in the realm of justice. Many have created—through comedy and humor, writing, research, the arts, and social action—humanizing narratives that push back against one-sided or dominant narratives of victimhood (for example, see @regcharging (Charging); Bida; Dougher; Madden; Noah; Rodriguez). Like Tuck, "I invite you to join me in re-visioning [representations] in our communities not only to recognize the need to document the effects of oppression on our communities but also to consider the long-term repercussions of thinking of ourselves as broken"

2 For me, "survivor" has been associated with "surviving": cancer, rape, and domestic violence. Like "victim," therefore, I believe "survivor," as a construct, still anchors an individual's trauma or pain and centers the damage or scars therefrom, limiting it to the human body—not the capacities of the soul—therefore, emphasizing the scars that remain from such experiences, not the healing, growth, and progress. Thus, instead of transcending our pain and suffering—accepting it happened, grieving it, and so on—we become stuck in limbo within a projected and/or internalized, one-dimensional posture of survivor of our own individual and collective making. There is no desire on my part to deny the name "survivor" for those who wish to claim it; it is solely a personal preference not to be perceived as a survivor or surviving. Living is also an option.

(409)—moving beyond satisfaction with representations of desire—moving along to recognition of and belief in our inherent spiritual reality—visibilizing nobility for ourselves and our communities, especially in numerous discourses about (in)justice and (in)equity. Most importantly, in this journey of renewal and reimagination, this visibilizing of nobility demands that we look at members of our human family who endure injustices and inequities—in varying degrees—with new eyes. They are not merely damaged bodies or spiritually disembodied beings, as too frequently depicted, but so much more. They are souls, embodiments of nobility or noble-embodied beings.

Reimagining Resistance, Visibilizing Justice/Nobility

My soul simultaneously aches and smiles whenever I ponder the Bahá'í perspective on the relationship between our inherent nobility and justice: "Justice is a noble quality and injustice an iniquity" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 79), particularly due to the horrific accumulation of dehumanization we are currently enduring. Learning this, however, has also forced me to question how, for decades, I could conceive of the inherent spiritual nobility of others and their justice while denying my own. But if "[j]ustice is a noble quality," what is true nobility, and what role(s) does it play in response to oppression, (in)justice, and (in)equity? What does nobility look like in the face of oppression, and would I recognize it? What examples in the world could I learn and draw from? How can we authentically and humbly engage in social action and the relevant discourses of society to "assail" the injustices and inequities of this world, while concurrently amplifying the spiritual reality—the nobility (and therefore, constructive resiliency) of the soul?

These questions have since evolved into two broader questions that I am still aiming to "perfect." First, how can we reconceptualize and participate in a body politic where we visibilize and center nobility in public discourses and social actions on the various entangled dimensions of injustice and inequity, including academic and activist spaces (and their convergences)? Second, how do exemplary narratives of constructive resilience help us honor and recognize the nobility of peoples and communities without delegitimizing and denying the social forces of oppression that exist and persist in the world? These questions, I imagine, are only a few of those I will live with all the days of my life, on this earthly plane, attempting to humbly explore and learn from.

It is my belief that visibilizing the inherent nobility of human souls is a key ingredient in the possibility of reimagining resistance as constructive resilience. 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes:

> In the world of existence there is nothing so important as spirit, nothing so essential as the spirit of man. The spirit of man is the most noble of phenomena . . . the collective center of all human virtues

> . . . the cause of the illumination of this world. (*Promulgation* 239–40)

Imagine if we all saw one another through this lens: as spirits, as nuclei of human virtues, as radiant lights—even amidst pain and suffering. When reflecting on this imagery, I cannot help but reflect on the analogies described by the Central Figures of the Bahá'í Faith regarding the entangled relationship between the most globally oppressed communities—as the "pupil of the eye,"—a metaphor distinctly introduced by Bahá'u'lláh for people of African descent—as portals of light, and Indigenous peoples as beacons of light who will become "so illumined as to enlighten the whole world" (*Tablets of the Divine Plan* 32). This spiritual reality cannot be reduced to coincidence. What if narratives of injustice and inequity faced by communities were paralleled by these noble qualities they possess? How might a nobility framework yield new opportunities for reimagining noble souls and their capacities of constructive thought and action in the face of injustice? While I fully advocate the necessity of unearthing and studying all facets of oppression, stopping at the paralysis of damage or victimhood from such oppression seems incomplete, falling short, and even a missed opportunity. Why not, rather, prepare and seek out pathways of transcendence through that oppression?

Today, more than ever, we are immersed in a cumulative amplification and hypervisibility of injustice and inequity on a number of intersecting levels. The global COVID-19 pandemic, combined with a rampant, heightened response to worldly injustices of anti-Blackness, anti-Indigeneity, anti-Asian violence, extremes of poverty and wealth, vaccine apartheid, xenophobia, racism, and patriarchy, and the list goes on—despite their persistence for centuries—have been characterized by varying calls for public action. Most of these movements have been motivated by the necessities of collective justice, while others have been fueled by demands for individual liberties. Mass public outcry is usually synonymous with or derived from—but not limited to—terms and concepts such as activism, boycott, demonstration, protest, resistance, and social movements, for example. The most prolific scholars of "social movement studies," particularly those educated and residing within a factory-like white, patriarchal Euro-American system of formal higher education, limit their definitions of collective action to criteria characteristic of contention and oppositionality. These conditions are clearly the most mediatized and popularized, but there are also more humanizing elements of social change that are almost always hidden from view. While the study of social movements is important, these criteria limit the possibilities of social change and the inherent capacities and contributions of humankind, especially the persistent efforts of those categorized and segmented as "marginalized" "oppressed," "underserved," and so on.

Such criteria visibilize negative imagery of collective action, while invisibilizing the inherent nobility of individuals and communities engaged in such action and their pursuit of justice and equity. The intensity of discourses and actions revolving around racial injustice, anti-Indigeneity, and anti-Blackness in the United States and globally reveals that this trend in visibilizing suffering while invisibilizing nobility is nothing new. However, the case for naming and centering inherent nobility is a novel, Bahá'í-inspired perspective.

In the process of spiritually excavating my inherent nobility, I was pulled by the arts and scholarship that would help me on this journey. In my research, I encountered many artistic and scholarly critiques of the hypervisibility of communities and peoples' trauma and victimhood, as well as arguments justifying the necessity to underscore and center their suffering. There were also works that visibilize the nobility of communities that endure injustice and how they constructively respond to systematic oppression. Representations that piqued my attention were those uniquely captured moments that humanize and celebrate individual and collective joy, self-care, and preservation in the midst of suffering just as much as they shed light on anger, grief, and pain. They highlight the *constructive resilience* of communities popularly portrayed on a default setting of "broken," disrobed of our nobility and costumed in descriptors of deficiency or what Walter (2016) calls the "five 'Ds' of data": disparity, deprivation, disadvantage, dysfunction, and difference (80).

In a message to Bahá'í students denied access to higher education in Iran, the Universal House of Justice addressed the historical oppression of their Bábí and Bahá'í spiritual ancestors, as well as their complementary inheritance of a constructively resilient spiritual capacity to advance beyond that same oppression: "You, too, demonstrate such noble qualities and, holding fast to these same principles, you belie the slander purveyed against your Faith" (9 Sept. 2007).

The Universal House of Justice also notes the centuries-long lives of African Americans in the United States as evidence of constructive resilience and calls upon the African American community to continue "to see in the recent turmoil opportunity rather than obstacle" (4 Feb. 2018). Constructive resilience, therefore, requires utilization of the spiritually inherent noble qualities of souls to "transcend" oppression, perceive what is possible "beyond the distress of difficulties [and obstacles] assailing them," and transform themselves and their communities through deeds that advance "spiritual and social development." The beauty of constructive resilience is its reliance upon an internal power of the spirit of peoples and their communities. It also surpasses the quantitative frontiers of "resilience" that have been amplified by social actions and discourses emerging across social media spaces, implying that #StillHere is commonly (mis) interpreted and limited to a *physical*

resilience. Furthermore, constructive resilience is by no means restricted to the Bahá'í community; nor is there a singular method or understanding in which constructive resilience can be achieved (Karlberg).

Sumud (دومص), an Arabic concept meaning steadfastness and "resilient resistance," can be traced back to the tenth century. Palestinian women use *sumud* as an explanation of their daily existence and collective empowerment, particularly through a reaffirmation of their identity, a "preservation" of Palestinian culture, and a "nurturance" of the Palestinian community (Ryan). holt explains how *Rezilience* (a combination of the slang term for reservation, "rez," and resilience), an Indigenous worldview, is an active teaching and learning practice for Indigenous communities to "reclaim, relearn, and reconnect with their ancestral ways of being" (72). *Rezilience* is an example of Vizenor's reference to Indigenous *survivance* (Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses*; Vizenor, *Survivance*; Vizenor and Lee), a "moving beyond [Indigenous] basic survival in the face of overwhelming cultural genocide to create spaces of synthesis and renewal" (Vizenor, *Manifest Manners* 53). Survivance echoes the sacredness of the Lakota word *takini*, which is often simply translated to survivor, but it means "to come back to life." *Takini*, is about restoring Indigenous communities and moving beyond survival, recalling stories of the ancestors and the historical trauma inherited, most associated with the U.S. Army's Seventh Calvary massacre of hundreds of Lakota women, men, and children at Wounded Knee in 1890 (Brings Plenty). Sørensen maps *constructive resistance*, referring to "initiatives in which people start to build the society they desire independently of the dominant structures already in place" (49) and relies on Vinthagen's definition, whereby constructive resistance is understood to "transcend the whole phenomenon of being-against-something, turning into the proactive form of constructing 'alternative' or 'prefigurative' social institutions which facilitate resistance" (7). These are only but a few conceptual and theoretical frameworks that, like constructive resilience, visibilize nobility, the highest aspirations of individuals and communities facing oppression in its various forms.

The Universal House of Justice, in another message, praises the Iranian Bahá'í community's establishment of the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE) in response to the government's systematic denial of higher education to all its Bahá'í citizenry as representative of "actions [that] are not confined to efforts to seek justice" (1 Oct. 2014). Furthermore, the establishment of the BIHE as an "unrelenting pursuit of knowledge is perhaps one of the most outstanding examples of constructive resilience in the modern age." Alternative peaceful measures to sustain teaching and learning within formal higher education have similarly been implemented through "street academies" in Turkey (Aktas et al.), underground universities in Kosovo (Sommers and Buckland) and Poland (Garlinski), and educational programs

held in private homes, religious institutions, and offices for students in Palestine (Zelkovitz).

Visibilizing Nobility as Meditation

While understanding the constructive capacity of the soul outside of myself, the struggle to see it within me was still very real. After completing a remote session with my psychotherapist, the fog gradually began to clear for me. Several years had passed since my PTSD diagnosis, while trudging along an evolving journey of disentanglement from its fetters. All this time, justice and equity had served as dual interlocking aspirations driving my activism, teaching, research, and writing, but my attempted efforts were constantly falling short. Even my determination to highlight narratives about the constructive, transformative capacities of "marginalized" and "oppressed" peoples and communities seemed rather oxymoronic. Externally, I was wholeheartedly committed to exposing (in)justice and the nobility among the hearts, minds, and souls of "the oppressed" (and the oppressors), but it was in competition with the internal invisibilization of my own nobility, as well as a forgetfulness in the pursuit of justice for myself.

Clearly, this sudden pull to visibilize nobility was new and uncomfortable, especially when related to my own being. Just before our first session had concluded, and with more than thirteen thousand kilometers between our computer screens, my therapist assigned me homework: "Recite a prayer every morning to recognize your own nobility." Mind. Blown. Her instructions were so simple, yet profoundly humbling. Pray for my own nobility?!? Is that actually a thing? Prayers for the ancestors, detachment, tests and difficulties, healing, steadfastness, (in)justice, love, praise of the Creator, my mother and father, my brother, my profession . . . were among the primary motivations for prostration and devotion. Never had praying for my own nobility (let alone recognizing it) been on my mind up to that point. Ever since that moment, I recite the following from *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh* daily as part of my morning meditation routine:

> 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? Out of the essence of knowledge I gave thee being, why seekest thou enlightenment from anyone beside Me? Out of the clay of love I molded thee, how dost thou busy thyself with another? Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee, mighty, powerful and self-subsisting. (#13, From the Arabic)

> O Son of Spirit!
> Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created. (#22, From the Arabic)

Reciting these sacred words and absorbing their meaning is equivalent to looking into a new, undistorted mirror that still requires daily meditation and application of my interpretation of those words into action in every phase of my life. In other words, I am still working on truly seeing the nobility and justice of my soul.

Challenging the historically situated Northwestern Hemispheric concept and identity of nobility (Leonhard and Wieland), this spiritual dimension of nobility—not unique to the Bahá'í teachings alone, not only reveals the power of our spiritual ancestral lineage, but also foreshadows the future of humankind and its inherent capacities to heal, transcend oppression, and advance intergenerationally. "A striking aspect of Bahá'í belief," Arbab purports, "is the extraordinary optimism it displays about humanity's future. Such hopefulness would be untenable were it not for a profound conviction, which arises from the Faith's teachings, that the human being was created noble" (175–76). Constructive resilience, therefore, is a sustainable, futuristic, intergenerational response to oppression that is associated with our spiritual afterlives.

Similarly, Smith's argument for "centering the 'pupil of the eye'" also exemplifies a noble spiritual station in defiance of an unceasing racial oppression endured for well over five centuries. According to Smith, "interpretations of the 'pupil of the eye' metaphor that fix upon the spiritual perceptiveness of [B]lack people are in keeping with a tradition of African American thought that was significantly advanced by Du Bois and that attempted to alchemize a history of oppression into a source of pride and inspiration" (13). If the material or physical frame of our bodies and the damage, harm, and trauma inflicted upon them become our primary point of focus, then we reproduce the same gaze that justifies oppression—a perception that humans are reduced to soulless bodies. We then lose sight of the core reality of the identity of our souls and their capacities of inherent nobility to withstand oppression and to do so constructively.

Our Noble Spiritual Afterlives and Futurisms

It is my sincerest hope that calling for the visibility of nobility (and its inherent relationship to the soul) is not mistaken for a desire to avoid, dehumanize, erase, invisibilize, silence, minimize, or disconnect the social realities of bodies or trauma, injustice, and inequity in this world—nor to essentialize or homogenize those social realities. Nor am I advocating for a partial visibility, but rather, inviting you—all of us—to consider one that is whole—one that captures both the corporeal and spiritual reality of humankind. For instance, "[i]dentify[ing] the achievement and exhilaration in [B]lack life is not to mute or minimize racism . . . there is a spiritual majesty of joy in suffering" and an invitation to not only possibly feel Black "pain but also the beauty of being human" (Perry). In a relevant

letter addressed to the U.S. Bahá'í community regarding intensifying racial injustices, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States wrote: "The language we use and the attitudes we take, while not ignoring the harsh realities that exist in the world, should appeal to the nobler aspirations of our fellow-citizens" (25 Feb. 2017). Accordingly, this is not an attempt to deny or delegitimize trauma, injustice, and inequity and their multitudinous effects on peoples and groups, but to celebrate and center fellow souls that are created to endure and move through and break free of the cages of such suffering.

May this be an invitation to all of us—especially to all the souls whose bodies have been and continue to feel or be treated as branded, broken, damaged, erased, inferior, invisible, and/or—as non-human, as well as those souls who, through their words, thoughts, or deeds, choose to read, see, and engage with souls as damaged, non-human, and ignoble—to visibilize nobility. Please join me in this ever-evolving journey to consider why and how visibilizing nobility helps us reimagine resistance as constructive resilience, to realize and celebrate our individual and collective inherent nobility, and to actualize our spiritual reality in our afterlives and our futures.

It is my hope that these closing words and this invitation do not at all suggest that I have forgotten my vulnerability in feeling exposed. Beloved revolutionary spiritual ancestors have been holding my hand, accompanying me along the way. One of my favorite guided meditations of Audre Lorde—"[T]hat visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength" (60)—comforts and assures me of the spiritual implications of being clothed in "nobility," even when feeling naked. We are, after all, spiritually destined to be "dressed in royal robes, to walk in glory for ever and ever" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 317). We *all* are created noble, and nobility looks *divine* on us, would you not agree? From the point of our conception—before our physical birth, and beyond—through our spiritual afterlives/futures, our inherent nobility continues to insist, persist, and transform into a new garment:

> O Thou Provider, O Thou Forgiver! A noble soul hath ascended unto the Kingdom of reality, and hastened from the mortal world of dust to the realm of everlasting glory. Exalt the station of this recently arrived guest, and attire this long-standing servant with a new and wondrous robe.
>
> O Thou Peerless Lord! Grant Thy forgiveness and tender care so that this soul may be admitted into the retreats of Thy mysteries and may become an intimate companion in the assemblage of splendours. Thou art the Giver, the Bestower, the Ever-Loving. Thou art the Pardoner, the Tender, the Most Powerful. (#11, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Prayers of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*)

Although far from completing the work of visibilizing nobility, what keeps me going is knowing we were created noble, and our nobility never dies . . .

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Community Agency and Islamic Education in Contemporary Zanzibar

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Western liberal political philosophy, which undergirds the conception of the modern nation-state as theorized by European philosophers of liberalism from centuries past, is primarily concerned with the dynamics of rights and responsibilities between the individual and state institutions. In defining these dynamics, some philosophers held an assumption of human nature as inherently inclined toward selfish ends, and as such they thoroughly questioned to what extent the state could intervene in the life of individuals in order to curb destructive and antisocial behavior. Others idealized the "state of nature" as peaceful, but, writing in the era of absolutist monarchs, they were primarily concerned with limiting the reach of sovereign power. Yet with whichever approach, "community" is not a viable actor in such theories, concerned as they are with arbitrating between the "freedom" of the individual and the coercive power of state institutions. Indeed, the very concept of community, especially communities of "minorities," is antithetical to the modern nation-state, as it implies allegiance to something other than the nation itself (Mahmood, *Religious Difference* 51–53).

Further, "harm" in this context means that which the state can redress through its judiciary, making it difficult to conceive of and address collective forms of oppression (Schwartzman), as they permeate daily life in microaggressions and regular expressions of prejudice, only some of which qualify for legal punishment. "Action" within this theoretical framework—the only recourse to individuals who have been harmed—means *demanding that the state act*, either through legislative change or judicial punishment. Yet while institutional and legal change affords important protections, injustice is incredibly resilient in the face of legal change. It adapts to and mutates within new structural limitations, finding legal loopholes and new euphemisms within which to operate.[1]

Examining communal social action within a part of the world not fully steeped within such ideologies offers insights into other forms of agency, forms that function within different paradigms of social life. Such examples of communal agency are "constructive" in that they focus on building new communal structures, structures

1 Paul Lample describes this with regards to race in the United States, with the official legal abolishment of slavery followed by Jim Crow laws and sharecropping, and with civil rights accompanied by other forms of institutionalized racism, such as mass incarceration (9). See also Alexander.

that attend to the immediate concerns of local reality while striving to inspire others at a broader level. The examples that follow, as with those from other Islamic societies, do not conform to normative liberal conceptions that understand agency "as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination," rather than simply "a capacity for action" (Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 18). This normative liberal conception of agency frames much of both popular and scholarly thought that seeks out examples of and romanticizes "resistance" (Abu-Lughod 41). While the kinds of agency described here operate within contexts of oppression that they seek to change, such agency is not principally about "resisting" authoritative structures and institutions, but instead creating new structures and patterns of community life that mirror the values they wish to see enacted, in this case values rooted within Islam.

Here I share, from my doctoral fieldwork on the East African islands of Zanzibar, the experiences of two friends and the communities within which they work as they seek to change their own and others' lives within the context of various forms of oppression. I share from Ustadh Juma,[2] a senior teacher at the largest Islamic school in Zanzibar, Madrasat Al-Núr, as he employs an Islamic education directed at countering the effects of Zanzibar's increased embeddedness in global capitalism since the end of Tanzania's socialist project in 1985, particularly the resulting rise in individualism and class stratification. In his classes, he emphasizes prosocial behavior and spiritual virtues central to community life, commenting directly on capitalist thought and its effects. More broadly, he contests the wider development ideology that posits Zanzibar as always behind, always the recipient of development knowledge but never the generator, by emphasizing to his students the ways in which they and Zanzibar are more "advanced" than the "advanced" nations—particularly in community cooperation and trust in God.

I also share from Rehema, a domestic worker who helped start a women's Islamic study circle in order to collectively advance the participants' own spiritual and material progress within the context of what Rehema describes as *mfumo dume*, literally the "male system" or patriarchy. Like Madrasat Al-Núr, the women's Islamic study circle seeks to engender community bonds among its participants, countering prevailing forces of individualism. This can be seen not only in the name of their group, Madrasat Jihád Al-Nafs—School for Battling the Self—but also the ways in which it serves as a vector for social, spiritual, and material support, particularly during times of hardship. It is also an opportunity for Rehema—who only completed a few years of formal education—and others to advance their education, as well as a space for women to occupy positions of Islamic leadership.

While offering examples of communal forms of agency, Ustadh Juma's

2 All names are pseudonyms.

and Rehema's experiences underscore a key challenge inherent to communal action, namely achieving a collective vision or conceptual framework. Here, action is undertaken within the framework of Islam, what they often refer to as a "framework/system of life" (*mfumo wa maisha*)—but whose Islam? In the absence of a universally agreed-upon Islamic authoritative body to guide interpretation, tensions arise as to the correct understanding of Islam and how that manifests in community life. For Ustadh Juma and his Madrasat Al-Núr, this plays out in the increased influence of Saudi Salafism, as a few teachers deride communal practices such as the school's celebration of the Prophet's birthday and engage in Salafi call-out culture that publicly shames others for what they deem illegitimate Islamic practice. For Rehema and her study circle, such tensions play out as, while carving new spaces for female Islamic leadership and advanced learning, they struggle to achieve consensus on other issues such as the permissibility of women attending communal prayers at the mosque.

Ustadh Juma: Islamic Education for Spiritual Progress

"A seller who prices his rice three times higher during scarcity is following the ideas of capitalism (*fikra za kibepari*), where each market increases in order to bring a profit," explained Ustadh Juma in his virtues class in the largest Islamic school (*madrasa*) in Zanzibar. In such a case, he continued, only the wealthy can afford to eat, while a virtuous seller would lower the price for the poor. Ustadh Juma regularly speaks about capitalism in his classes, in between reading from the Arabic textbooks imported from Saudi Arabia. When I asked him why he speaks about capitalism so much in class, he responded: "Because in capitalism, your mind is only focused on economic benefit . . . yet economic benefit [alone] does not take care of people or anything else. . . . This is not a good thing in Islam or any society because what is its result? It divides people into classes. . . There are times when you must put people before profit."

Ustadh Juma and other Islamic educators in Zanzibar see their work as a vital corrective to the rising individualism and class stratification associated with increased embeddedness in capitalist processes, especially since the end of Tanzanian socialism in 1985 and the country's opening to global capitalist development, investment, and structural adjustment loans. The 1980s and '90s saw a rapid expansion of development in infrastructure and new economic sectors, including the extension of electricity and paved roads throughout the island, the growth of tourism, and the introduction of seaweed farming for women as an export commodity. Economic and social life has shifted drastically, prompting what many articulate through the language of "moral decline." Youth exposure to the wealthier lifestyles of tourists, as well as access to cash, invites new consumer patterns including

conspicuous consumption of clothing, cell phones, and other expensive items. Conspicuous consumption is read as highly individualistic and antisocial in a society whose social institutions such as weddings and funerals are characterized by high reciprocity, and where any economic windfall is expected to be shared among one's networks—Zanzibaris often purchase items like flour and kerosene in small amounts daily rather than in bulk, as stockpiling brings the obligation to share (Winther 151). That capitalist acquisition is inimical to this expectation can be seen in the fact that the word for "capitalism" in Swahili (*ubepari*) is linked to the word for "hoarder" (*bepari*).

Ustadh Juma narrated this decline through the language of unity: "Unity has decreased a lot . . . and people are not visiting each other as much." It used to be that everyone had nearly the same income, he continued, but now there are significant differences and people are living behind fences and gates—and if he wants to visit with them, he must make an appointment. Ustadh Juma regularly commented on the opening of the first gated community in Zanzibar, called Fumba Town, which would have its own community institutions including a school, mosque, and shopping center. This would vacate the wealthy from sites where they would otherwise interact with the poor, lessening opportunities for generosity and redistribution of wealth during community events such as weddings and funerals. "All of those with means will leave," he explained, "and the poor will not have any helper."

Islamic education is seen as a vital corrective to these trends because it has the power to quiet the self, to lessen greed in preference for community welfare, and to inculcate spiritual qualities in children and youth that result in the wellbeing of all. Secular studies, Ustadh Juma's colleague Salmin explained, are primarily for the individual to advance personally and economically by ensuring a good income. But Islamic education primarily benefits society, Salmin continued, because it "builds a person individually, his values so that he is truthful, trustworthy, and loves to do work" that then translates into broader society so that "we help each other, respect each other, and sit well together as a community." Many Zanzibaris see this centrality of community, as enhanced by Islamic piety, as one of the most laudable features of their society. Given that dominant development approaches assume a linear movement of knowledge from the Global North to the South, valuing "local knowledge" largely in isolated techniques rather than broader ways of knowing that might also be relevant to the North, I asked Ustadh Juma how he felt Zanzibar was more "advanced" and what "developed countries" can learn from it. "Community cooperation," he replied.

Further, while highlighting the advances of Europe and the United States that he hoped Zanzibaris will emulate, such as a spirit of volunteerism, he often would encourage his students to value their own strengths. For

example, in one class he paused to ask me how to say a word in English, and then used it only in English throughout his lecture: "stress." In the United States and Europe, he explained, they have more wealth but they also have so much stress that they have to go to psychologists. In Zanzibar and other Islamic countries, he explained, people are poor but they rely upon God and therefore become calm as reliance on God removes stress.

Ustadh Juma used Islamic education not only as a tool to counter rising individualism and class stratification, but also to bolster his students' sense of self-worth within a global structure that, as they are well aware, casts them as "third world" or "developing" and therefore not a source of globally relevant knowledge. Ustadh Juma effectively flipped that formulation by introducing a spiritual measure alongside the dominant material measure—the United States and Europe may be more successful materially, alongside those Zanzibaris who have benefitted from capitalist development, but that is not the sole index of inherent worth. Zanzibaris, despite largely being materially poor, have much that the "developed" world can learn from: their reliance on and trust in God, and the centrality of community as built through spiritual education. This manifested in the communal activities surrounding the school, including the *mawlid* celebrations of the Prophet's birthday or the *iftar* dinners served after fasting during Ramadan, where some of the wealthiest Zanzibari businessmen can be seen serving food to the children and other attendees.

Yet not all of the teachers at the school hold the same vision, causing tension in the breakroom. This was principally a result of the increased influence of Saudi Salafism and its denigration of popular Islamic communal practices and values—whether in publicly denouncing communal spaces of Sufi worship, or in the lack of respect afforded to elders and their knowledge or authority. Public shaming of elders, alongside regular Salafi denigration of popular communal practices, runs counter to the kinds of prosocial virtues taught in Ustadh Juma's classes—for example, when he tells his students not to admonish others for incorrect practice as the "method of the Prophet was that of conversation," not accusation.

Rehema: Battling the Self for Collective WellBeing

Packed tightly in the *dala dala* minibus careening around the traffic circle, I protested that Rehema had paid my fare before I even had the chance to pull out my own change. She smiled and said not to worry, that she would get *thawabu*, or extra blessings, for it. To return the favor, I learned to be quicker about having coins in hand during our subsequent trips to her women's *madrasa*. Rehema was a domestic worker from mainland Tanzania who has lived and worked in Zanzibar most of her adult life, and we attended the *madrasa* with another friend who lived in the guesthouse where Rehema worked.

She tapped the metal roof with coins to indicate our stop to the driver, and we squeezed out of the minibus onto the side of the road. Passing through a local market selling house and kitchen wares, we emerged into a residential area crisscrossed by dirt paths between concrete walls topped by corrugated metal roofs. As we entered the meeting room, Rehema drew her black *niqáb* face veil over the top of her head to reveal her smiling face, and we were greeted by similarly dressed and smiling women as we found places on the carpeted floor to sit and talk while waiting for class to begin.

Like Madrasat Al-Núr, this adult women's *madrasa* is focused on countering the forces of individualism through the creation of a community space within which Islamic education can inspire individual and collective pious behavior. This can be seen in the name that they chose for their group—Madrasat Jihád An-Nafs, meaning School for Battling the Self. "Jihad is what trains us, it is fighting with the self . . . it makes me progress developmentally for the afterlife," Rehema explained. Jihad is not something for terrorists (*magaidi*), she continued, because "we cannot fight because of Islam, people are mistaken. Now we do not fight wars, we fight to study. We study so that we understand, we must explain that now we are fighting to become self-liberated." *Jihád an-nafs* means to "remove a person from a state of ignorance," she said, to battle with the self until "we are sated with the real food, this book."

This communal focus can be seen in both the behavioral patterns and content of the *madrasa* space. For example, on days that they do not study, they gather simply to read the Qur'an together. When I asked why they come together only to read individually, their teacher Zahra explained that if they were at home, they would not be able to read given their domestic responsibilities; further, "If we sit together, we can help each other understand." The content of the classes bolstered this communal focus by regularly emphasizing that personal piety is demonstrated through good works to others, as praying and fasting alone are not sufficient—all must greet their neighbors and solve their problems together, as one cannot say, "I myself am fine." In one class, a teacher enumerated the "rights" (*hakī*) that Muslims have from one another: to be greeted with "peace be upon you," to be told "God bless you" if one sneezes, to be taken care of if sick, and to have the funeral attended if one dies. "Rights" in this context are explained not as individual rights protected by state institutions, but as the responsibilities of care that Muslims are obligated to afford to one another.

This kind of social and moral communal imbrication is evidence of what Haj describes in Islam as "a view of the relationship between the individual, the community, and the state that differs from the European liberal humanist tradition" (28), where individual worship (*'ibáda*) and practice "assumes an individual belonging within the community" (29) and indeed that a "Muslim

cannot attain these virtues except as a member of a community" (42). One cannot operate as "an independent, rationally detached individual" given that all are "held accountable for each other's moral state of being" (41). I felt this tension between an American understanding of individual rights and an Islamic communal moral obligation one day when I arrived at the *madrasa* and was eagerly called over by Awatif, a woman with whom I had had friendly conversations during previous weeks. As usual when entering Islamic spaces, I had wrapped a scarf around my head—yet that day I tied it such that part of one ear could be seen, the final flap pinned above my ear rather than tucked under my chin. As I sat down next to her, Awatif promptly tucked my scarf under my chin. At first I resented what felt like an intrusion on personal space and a violation of religious freedom given that, not being a Muslim, I wore it only out of respect. Immediately to my mind came a Qur'anic verse—"let there be no compulsion in religion" (2:256)—that was frequently invoked in my previous workplace, a U.S. Islamic organization, to show that Islam promotes an American-style freedom of religion. Yet whenever I mentioned this verse to Zanzibari Muslims, I did not get the knowing nods that I got in the United States, as it was not as commonly cited and referred to. In the United States, rights and freedoms are often articulated in the negative (as freedom *from*), implying that the individual should be able to pursue what they like without encroachment by others on their speech, religious practice, and other behavior. Yet in this context, "rights" (*haki*) entailed the right to receive care from other community members, care which also manifested as moral correction.

Rehema saw this space as especially vital given what she describes as "*mfumo dume*," the male system or patriarchy. The kind of care that the women give each other is not only spiritual, but also social, including visiting each other when ill and consulting together on problems, and material, as they pool together money when someone is in need, and Rehema herself has found domestic work for tens of women who could not have found it otherwise. They can therefore achieve a "self-reliance" where the "self" is in the collective, referring to the women of the group as a whole (Ott). With her *madrasa*, she has found an avenue to advance her own education. This kind of advanced Islamic education for women provides them room in Islamic leadership, which is a male-dominated field. And this space allows for women to gain their own understanding of Islam and the Qur'an that allows them to question their husbands' Islamic justifications for demands such as, Rehema describes, that their wives should not leave the home.

At the same time, the kinds of social action demonstrated in Rehema's group are constrained by tensions at the level of conceptual framework, especially as related to correct Islamic interpretation. This manifests in moments of disagreement in class, for

example, in one study class when the women read from their textbook that only men must attend Friday prayers at the mosque. Some agreed, saying that women's main role on Friday is to close their shops to encourage neighborhood men to attend mosque. Rehema interjected that she sometimes attends Friday prayers at the mosque. Another replied that it is not forbidden, but that "the man is the leader even if he is a child" and so she should first send the men in her home. This challenge also manifested in their efforts to expand their circle; for example, when they traveled to a rural village to open another women's *madrasa*, they were rebuffed by many in the village as "terrorists" (*magaidi*) because their long black over-dresses and *niqáb* face coverings were not common outside of town and signaled a new conservatism. Lastly, while providing spaces for women's Islamic leadership, the head teacher Zahra was clear that women have limits and cannot be leaders more broadly.

Community Agency and Social Change

Ustadh Juma, Rehema, and the groups within which they work see themselves as operating within contexts defined by powerful oppressive forces. Ustadh Juma and colleagues see their teaching as countering the forces of rising individualism and class stratification. They aim to cultivate spiritual virtues that result in prosocial behavior, strengthening the bonds of community that then become spaces within which social change occurs, including the pious redistribution of wealth. Ustadh Juma also seeks to inculcate in his students a sense of individual and collective self-worth, emphasizing that Zanzibar has many strengths that other global communities can learn from. While he never explicitly mentioned race, we could see his work as operating within contexts of racism: a global development ideology that sees valuable knowledge as primarily flowing from North to South, and Saudi Salafi proselytism that paints Islam in Africa as muddied by polytheism, whether through the predominance of Sufi practices or popular recourse to magic. For Rehema and the women in her *madrasa*, they also see their communal space as countering the forces of individualism, as they "battle the self" to collectively work for their spiritual, social, and material wellbeing. This helps them each to weather life's hardships as vectored through class and gender inequalities, while opening up Islamic educational opportunities and knowledge that would otherwise be unavailable to them. Such communal forms of agency are constructive in that they create new structures and patterns of behavior within pockets of Zanzibari society, seeking to address forms of oppression through the creation of new spaces modeled on alternative foundations.

When Ustadh Juma said that "developed" or "advanced" nations could learn community cooperation from Zanzibar, he was responding to the ideologies predominant in the

United States and Europe, which he experienced through globalized economic and political forces acting upon his tiny island perched on the edges of Africa and the Indian Ocean. (He could not see the long traditions of communal agency among oppressed groups in those regions, some of which are described in this collection.) Examining the features of communal forms of agency in Zanzibar remains relevant more broadly given that the dominant globalized economic and political forces acting upon Zanzibar also act upon those of us in the regions in which they were first articulated. It gives a glimpse of a part of the world where community is a central protagonist in social life, despite the globalized forces that increasingly undermine it. Community's primary role can be seen in patterns of interdependence and the moral responsibility to redistribute one's wealth, including the belief that if one does not share an economic windfall, then they will become physically sick as a result of others' jealousy.

This centrality of community can also be seen in how the language of "rights" (*haki*) was marshalled in Rehema's *madrasa* to mean communal rights of care—that one has the right to be told "God bless you" when having sneezed and the right to be cared for when sick. This definition is significant given the highly individualistic framework for understanding rights in the Global North and international institutions. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example, does not address community or minority group rights, making it difficult for groups to use it to address collective injustice. For example, after the Declaration was issued in 1948, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People tried to make a case for racial equality on its basis, but Eleanor Roosevelt rebuffed it, declaring that the "minority question [does] not exist on the American continent" (Anderson). This lack of protection for community rights prompted the United Nations to pass a Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2007, which asserts indigenous groups' rights to their own governance and to protect their cultures and religions. Yet its force is limited in being not legally binding, limiting redress to be pursued through national legal frameworks. When rights are legally understood as an attribute of individuals, collective forms of oppression are rendered invisible to liberal state institutions.

The examples of Madrasat Al-Núr and Madrasat Jihád Al-Nafs show responses to collective forms of oppression that are vectored through the agency of communities as guided by Islamic commitments. The impulse to label or glorify such activities as "resistance" to oppressive forces, such as capitalism or patriarchy, is rooted within a Western liberal conception of agency. Scholars of Islamic revivalism have regularly questioned the applicability of the resistance paradigm for analyzing such movements, where agency is not enacted against a structure or institution but rather channeled by it (Mahmood, *Politics of Piety* 18).

Yet, what such scholarship does not address in these contexts is the centrality of community as a protagonist of social action between the individual and the state—an actor which is at best ignored or at worst undermined by liberal political philosophies. Centering communal action introduces a form of agency hitherto illegible in such perspectives, a form of agency in response to oppression that is not centered on the individual demanding that institutions act, but that constructs new patterns of behavior on alternative foundations.

Yet, as demonstrated above, a key challenge facing communal social action is that of constructing a shared conceptual framework for that action, a challenge that manifests in Zanzibar in tensions regarding correct Islamic interpretation. In the absence of a universally agreed-upon Islamic interpretive authority, multiple authorities vie for prominence—whether locally at the level of preachers and teachers, or internationally, as with the Saudi Arabian religious elite's attempt to define Islamic orthodoxy through educational scholarships and missionary ventures. Should knowledge generation be a collective process, or one centered on a hierarchical exchange from an individual knower to the group? Are communal Sufi devotional practices permissible, or condemned as polytheistic innovations that muddy the purity of original Islamic practice? Communal action is constrained insofar as such questions remain unanswered.

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Eastern Beauty
M. BUNCH WASHINGTON

Romy and me
M. BUNCH WASHINGTON

Faith in Action: Reflections on Constructive Resilience from Nicaragua

BRADLEY WILSON

On 29 July 2003, thousands of unemployed farmworkers and their families who had been evicted from coffee estates in the province of Matagalpa, Nicaragua, joined a peaceful march. "The March of the Hungry," as they named their public demonstration, was not hyperbole. In 2001, global coffee prices had plummeted to record lows, leaving millions of rural people without sufficient income or resources to survive. In Nicaragua, this crisis impacted some 100,000 people, most intensely, landless farmworkers. Unable to remain on plantations foreclosed upon by banks and unwilling to illegally squat, evicted farmworkers in Matagalpa built makeshift economic refugee camps which housed an estimated seven thousand people by 2003. These encampments, coordinated by homeless families themselves, lined the roads heading north. For three years these encampments were a constant reminder of the economic devastation and mass unemployment precipitated by the coffee crisis and the inability or unwillingness of the government to respond to their most basic needs.

The March of the Hungry, as the farmworkers said, drew needed attention to their suffering and called for the government to fulfill its modest promise to provide suitable land for cultivation on the now idle estates where many had lived and worked their entire lives. The march, and the movement which spawned it, was distinctive. Composed entirely of homeless and landless farmworkers, led by women, and inclusive of children, both march and movement were intentionally non-violent. Just a decade earlier Nicaragua had emerged from a devastating civil war which had ripped the country apart. The very region from which the marchers were requesting land was one of the primary arenas of the war. This history shaped perceptions of the people of the region. While national and international newspapers offered sympathetic stories, in national opinion and gossip circles commentators offered deeply prejudiced and racist views toward the marchers, calling them opportunists, criminal, lazy, ignorant, and undeserving of special concern. Many passed judgment on their morality and motives. Indeed, in many ways their long suffering and the limited options before them to express their grievances—necessitating that they take to the road to make their plight visible—were intimately tied to the prejudice against them and other poor people of indigenous descent in Central Nicaragua.[1]

1 As noted in this special issue of the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, the discourse of constructive resilience has led in some cases to consultation about what

On July 30, I rode by bus to Matagalpa to learn more about the marchers. I encountered them as they were setting up camp for the night on a hillside pass called Cerro Largo (Long Hill), located to the south of the city of Matagalpa. Coordinators had made the thoughtful decision to end the day's march at noon, following the death of an infant from a fever and of an elderly man from dehydration and exhaustion that morning. It was a grim scene. I arrived at lunchtime when groups had gathered to eat around communal pots of donated rice. Entire families had been brought along, children in tow. The heavy rain was unrelenting. The marchers were in mourning and visibly exhausted. All were concerned about the poor and deteriorating weather conditions. Throngs of people, unprepared for the rain, stretched from the foreground to the horizon in the scene before me. Crowds of people stood, sat, or slept on the side of the road, still many kilometers away from their intended destination.

As I walked among the marchers, I noticed a group of families who appeared to need more shelter. There I met Soledad, the mother of three teenage boys. I asked her why she had joined the march. At that time, I knew little of what was transpiring, the history that preceded it, or the goals that had inspired the march. Soledad's voice was soft but earnest: "Because we exist," she said. I squatted down to hear her more clearly. The cold rain began to pound harder against the tarp above our heads, nearly drowning out her voice:

> We have been abandoned, but we still exist. The workers, the *campesinas*, the people of the countryside. Where we live, it is just a little place, but there are many hungry people there. There are many communities just like ours where the children are malnourished, without homes and sick. We have been forgotten but we exist. We will continue on with God by our side.

Fifteen years after I met Soledad at Cerro Largo, I joined a collective of

constitutes constructive forms of social action in the face of oppression. While this is certainly worthwhile from the standpoint of individual and collective moral decision-making, it is not the intention of this paper to evaluate or judge the form of action taken, nor to evaluate the efficacy of particular tactics or strategies. Indeed, it is my observation that such judgements tend to offer an analysis of an isolated episode of action in the lives of protagonists, present reductionist accounts of movements that narrow them down to their dominant discourses, and limit our ability to understand the nuanced attitudes, beliefs and intentions of people to overcome oppression. In other words, as a writer, I do not intend to present my account here as a judgement on specific tactics or strategies employed by oppressed groups. I have learned, however, that there is much to gain about the role of faith in social action by direct observation and deepening analysis with protagonists of what might be characterized as social movements.

Bahá'í scholars engaging, from our varied fields, in a discourse on constructive resilience which was initiated by the Universal House of Justice in a series of letters to the Bahá'ís of Iran. The concept was introduced as a way to describe the spiritual qualities, community agency, and creative action of Iranian Bahá'ís who were facing relentless persecution (Universal House of Justice, 9 Sept. 2007). More recently, constructive resilience was also invoked by the Universal House of Justice to describe African American Bahá'ís laboring for unity in the context of long histories of racial oppression in the United States (4 Feb. 2018). Some of the questions we explored together included: What might it mean to do scholarship in light of spiritual qualities associated with constructive resilience? What might the concept of constructive resilience ask of us as scholars concerned with social, economic, or environmental justice? How might attention to constructive resilience transform our practice of inquiry and contribute to knowledge production?

During my reflection on the discourse around constructive resilience, my thoughts have often returned to Soledad and the story of landless workers in Nicaragua. As Paul Lample writes in *Revelation and Social Reality*, "a Bahá'í life is not lived in isolation. It is forged in active engagement with the world, working with others and contributing to the advancement of society" (3). My experience and engagement with Soledad and the landless workers movement has offered me a means of reflection on how, as scholars, we might extend our learning about the spiritual qualities embodied in the notion of constructive resilience. Soledad was not a Bahá'í, and to my knowledge, none of the members of the March of the Hungry or their communities were members of the Bahá'í Faith. I met Soledad just a few years after becoming acquainted with the Bahá'í Faith myself. Our encounter at the march, therefore, mingled with my own deepening understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. Like many who encounter the Sacred Writings, I was learning to walk a newfound spiritual path and to see the world with new eyes. What I learned from Soledad, what I witnessed in her community, had a profound effect on my understanding of the life of the spirit and the nature of spiritually informed scholarship.

In this brief essay I draw upon my long-term research with the landless workers movement in Nicaragua to make several observations on the discourse of constructive resilience. While constructive resilience has largely been applied to understanding how Bahá'í communities negotiate life under oppression, I first consider how it also invites a posture of learning on research about other social movements seeking to overcome oppression. As evidenced in this issue, constructive resilience is a deeply personal expression of faith and a form of constructive action that shapes individual lives and communities. As such, I posit that the practices of accompaniment—an approach to

research which calls for immersive participation and observation over a long period—can provide a means through which to study different manifestations of constructive resilience, at various scales, in a diverse range of social movements.

Faith and Social Action

The role of faith in social action has been central to our exploration of constructive resilience over the past few years. Faith often plays a critical role in motivating, sustaining, and giving moral direction to individuals and communities seeking to overcome oppression. Some movements come into being precisely because some spirit of faith in creating a different future has been enkindled, a moral charge has been felt and acted upon, or an injustice has been experienced and inspired social action. Yet, faith is not one of the primary concerns of scholarship on social action. Faith is often narrowly described in literature on social action in terms of simple group identification in relation to a particular religious sect or spiritual ideology. In other cases, faith might be described as optimism or hope for a brighter future, or an enduring belief that "we shall overcome." Faith plays an animating role in how people envision themselves and their spiritual and material reality. 'Abdu'l-Bahá offers a distinctive perspective on faith. He states: "By faith is meant, first, conscious knowledge, and second, the practice of good deeds" (*Tablets* 549). Here faith might be observed as taking on a metaphysical dimension as conscious faith in God and the practice of that faith through action. Yet, this translation of metaphysical faith into action might also be observed socially. In other words, through the faithful actions of people, good deeds might enact practical worlds that draw the attention of others who might witness and become inspired in their own faith, in humanity or in God. This kind of faith in action might also inspire more faithful action. Faith therefore is not a passive, individual spiritual and moral feeling that is only rooted in consciousness; faith as it is translated into good deeds might also be understood as productive and can take on active social dimensions that affect a wider moral field that can reach the scale of entire communities.

Yet, people can also lose faith in God, themselves, others, religion, organization or the moral charge of a movement. Faith can wax and wane, thereby affecting social action or leading to a deviation from principle. The loss of faith may be caused by a variety of factors. In some cases, it might be by the immoral actions of leaders or organizations, or the failure of one or another tactic or strategy to achieve a promised goal. Yet, in many other cases, losing faith can come from the unrelenting persecution by more powerful groups against those who attempt to change their situation. Over time people lose hope and the lights of faith are smothered. Commitments to principles slip. Division and discord disrupt existing solidarities. Hopelessness grows

from an individual experience into a collective social feeling that change is impossible or that non-violent or other forms of constructive action are not enough.

Not long after I met Soledad, the Universal House of Justice penned a letter to the Bahá'ís of Iran admiring their "confident mastery" of "moral purpose" and their love, sacrifice, and service to the people of their homeland in the face of decades of deliberate oppression. Their words of admiration were complemented by a conceptualization of oppression which drew attention to both its material and spiritual dimensions:

> The victims of injustice today number in countless millions. Each year, the agendas of the human rights organizations are overwhelmed by appeals from spokespersons for oppressed minorities of every type—religious, ethnic, social and national. In the words of Bahá'u'lláh, "Justice is in this day bewailing its plight, and Equity groaneth beneath the yoke of oppression." What has more alarmed perceptive observers of such situations than even the physical and material anguish caused is the spiritual damage done to the victims. Deliberate oppression aims at dehumanizing those whom it subjugates and at de-legitimizing them as members of society, entitled to neither rights nor consideration. Where such conditions persist over any length of time, many of those affected lose confidence in their own perception of themselves. Inexorably, they become drained of that spirit of initiative that is integral to human nature and are reduced to the level of objects to be dealt with as their rulers decide. Indeed, some who are exposed to sustained oppression can become so conditioned to a culture of brutalization that they, in their turn, are ready to commit violence against others, should the opportunity offer itself. (26 Nov. 2003)

In this passage, the Universal House of Justice describes the widespread experience of oppression around the world, the material harm it inflicts, the dehumanization it effects, and the marginalization it causes by preventing full participation in society with "rights and consideration." Additionally, the Universal House of Justice calls specific and distinctive attention to oppression's spiritual dimensions, which quash individual and collective initiative, objectify and brutalize human beings, and incubate the cultures of violence that can result from long histories of exposure to such objectification and brutalization.

After offering these insights on the nature of oppression, the Universal House of Justice then continues by posing a series of questions to the Iranian Bahá'ís who have experienced such oppression:

> What is it then . . . that has preserved you from spiritual corrosion

> of this nature? Where have you found the resources to free your hearts from resentment and to act with magnanimity toward those who have taken part in your mistreatment? How is it that, after a century and more of unremitting persecution—and the calculated attempt at genocide of these past 25 years—you still retain both a confident mastery of your moral purpose and an abiding love for the land in which you have suffered so greatly? (26 Nov. 2003)

These questions invited consideration of how the Iranian Bahá'ís overcome the brutalizing effects of oppression without responding in equal measure and of the role that spiritual resources, a sense of moral purpose, love, and solidarity play in their persistent efforts to contribute to the advancement of initiatives serving their communities, such as expanding educational opportunities for women and girls, supporting access to higher education, and fostering economic cooperation. Rather than losing faith in the potential for social transformation, they have kept their faith alive and channeled it into constructive action.

Faith, as the Universal House of Justice's messages suggest, plays a clear and significant role in shaping both the consciousness and action of the Iranian Bahá'ís and, in later letters, the Bahá'ís in the United States advancing race unity. Faith in the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, in their moral purpose, and in the guidance of the Central Figures and institutions—including the Universal House of Justice—enables individual Bahá'ís to express confidence, strengthens their resolve to be magnanimous, and helps fortify them in the face of oppressive forces that might otherwise cause them to "lose confidence in their own perceptions of themselves" or become "drained" of the "spirit of initiative." Yet, beyond the individual, this faith is also visible in practice at the scale of the wider collective or community. There is a communal sense of faith that is nourished by witnessing the sacrifices and commitments—faith in action—performed by groups of individuals.

Starting with our first encounter in 2003, Soledad introduced me to some of these very same expressions of constructive resilience and gave it meaningful expression. As I conversed with her, I often asked these questions: Why had the movement pursued a non-violent path when armed struggle over land had been the previous path? What shielded them from bitterness? How could she "free her heart from resentment" and maintain "abiding love" for the people in her country when her past experience had been so treacherous? Counter to the prejudice heaped against them, the earnest determination through which marchers like Soledad pursued their goals was impressive to those who visited the camps. Soledad said to me years later that she often prayed that "God would touch the hearts" of those who held prejudice against them, including the political and landed elites, who were not only

an impediment to their modest goals but were also responsible for the systemic oppression they experienced. Her faith, fortitude, and perseverance, viewed from the standpoint of a witness to her oppression, bespoke a kind of spiritual power that was difficult to dismiss. Indeed, perhaps the only way for the elites to deny her and her kindred was—as she bore witness—to abandon her, to try and erase her from memory, to marginalize her from view, to deny her existence. The ruling elites tried this strategy, yet they could not snuff out the light of her spirit.

Accompaniment

My relationship with Soledad taught me that connecting deeply with people participating in social action to overcome oppression matters. I say this not only from the standpoint of scholarly interpretation but also from the standpoint of spiritual insight. Spiritual qualities are expressed by people living and negotiating social realities in different material contexts. Since constructive resilience concerns faith and is principally expressed in the spiritual qualities and actions of individuals and communities experiencing oppression, it is important therefore to get below the surface text of a particular movement and accompany people struggling to overcome oppression. While movement leaders, organizations, and discourses are important in understanding the dominant frames of social action and movement formation in any given instance, movements are also composed of individuals, institutions, and communities in all of their complexity. While a movement may appear to be a coherent whole, there may be considerable differences within it that shape its discourses, approaches, and outcomes. For this reason, it is critical to use care in making sense of movements based solely on the dominant public discourses that define them.

The practice of accompaniment, I urge, can enable scholars to prioritize inquiry over judgment, and illumination over reductionist accounts of social action. As my colleague and friend Daniel Renfrew writes, ethnography as a form of accompaniment can lead to "the deceptively simple act of forging empathetic understandings of the complexity of local social worlds" (167). Rather than a snapshot or snap judgment, a longer exposure through a relationship of accompaniment guided by empathy can yield critical insights into the elements of context that illumine why and how protagonists of movements engage in social action. Such a humble posture of inquiry is particularly important when we are *not* members of that particular oppressed group pursuing a path of social action to address injustice. As bystanders or outside observers, we may be swayed by discourse, imagery, and ideas that aim to represent movements as a totality or to reduce people to pawns or objects within an elaborate chess match with a clear endgame.

For the next five years after our encounter at Cerro Largo, I would visit Soledad in her home to meet her family

and to listen to her stories of struggle and survival. Unwilling to see her as simply a pawn swept up in a mass movement, I wanted to understand what motivated her, the challenges she faced, her life story, and what kind of future she wanted for herself, her family, and her community. During this period, the state ultimately responded to their petitions and provided land to the evicted and unemployed farmworker communities. This was the first time Soledad and her family had experienced economic autonomy, and for many of the people it was the first in their lives that they were truly working for themselves. The warm welcome she offered when I visited her led me to return again and again. As my visits continued and my conversations extended with Soledad, her family, community, and many other neighboring communities, a more nuanced picture emerged of the landless workers movement, the crises that prefigured it, and the long struggle ahead for its protagonists as they tried to forge a life of dignity and overcome oppression. I learned about the trail of injustice experienced by other landless and poor rural people who are treated either instrumentally or as an afterthought in economic decision-making.

In those years, as I observed the communities attempt to work through these challenging questions, I would learn about Soledad's commitment to social transformation, her contributions to provisioning meals for children across several communities, and her work with her husband to form an agricultural cooperative and to lift up the economic capacity of other members of their community. In other words, I did not learn about that vision she had on the road at Cerro Largo. To gain that understanding of Soledad's faith in social transformation would require a deeper commitment to listening and learning. These visits not only deepened my relationship with Soledad, her family, and community; her spiritual qualities also inspired me and taught me a great deal about responsibility as a person and humility as a scholar. I learned how she came to live as a worker on the estate property in Matagalpa and the sense of powerlessness she felt to the whims of the landowner, the state, and the political parties, which had each made claims to the land she and her family worked for their livelihood. I learned about the devastation of the civil war and the violence that left deep wounds of trauma in families and the community. I learned about her sense of economic vulnerability as a woman in a household, community, and movement where men often control resources and decision-making processes. I learned about the central role of women in guiding the non-violent approach of the landless workers movement. Yet, I also learned from her about the internal challenges in her family and in the community where she lived. I learned about the continued pressures from land grabbers coveting their land, the difficulties of economic cooperation in an environment beset by competition, and the real fear she and her family felt about losing those

small resources which they had gained. Faith in God, through all of these conversations, shaped the contours of her commentaries and maintained, always on the horizon, a sense of meaning in her struggle and hope for the future.

Conclusion

Constructive resilience is a deeply personal expression of faith and a form of social action that shapes individual lives and communities. People who are engaged in diverse movements, spiritual traditions, and material contexts offer unique insights into the fortitude, hope, and perseverance necessary to keep the faith and continue to believe in and work for a future free from oppression. Soledad provides one example of how faith plays a central role in one's life and struggle. In these years of working alongside people like her, I have learned that the practice of accompaniment can provide a means through which to study different manifestations of constructive resilience in a diverse range of social movements. Accompaniment, as a methodological commitment, invites a humble posture of learning about people and movements as they seek to overcome oppression. Through accompaniment we can come to understand and empathize with the nuanced lived experiences of people who take up social action, their motivations, their struggles, and their achievements. Long-term accompaniment also challenges what it means to study a movement whose work is still in progress, much like the Bahá'í communities around the world, who aspire to build societies founded on justice, equity, and unity.

Bahá'ís understand that, in their own efforts, both urgent action and long-term commitments are necessary to overcome oppression, and they realize that the ends of these constant efforts will not materialize quickly. Many movements to end oppression around the world realize these same truths. People of faith press on with the realization that they may never witness the just world that they are struggling to birth. There is recognition that principles are paramount, mistakes will be made along the way, and action and reflection will be necessary for the process of learning and growing. To this end, it is notable that the Universal House of Justice frames all its messages referencing constructive resilience in encouraging and empathetic tones, and that it writes words which remind those who are struggling that their labor is not in vain, that there is a deeper moral reason for persisting that exceeds the short-term gains of any particular material strategic goal. Its praise is not directed to victories that have been "won" nor to some task that has been achieved or completed. Rather, in its letters, the Universal House of Justice recognizes the admirable spiritual qualities of its readers, and they uplift the aspirations, goals, and constructive forms of action performed by individuals and communities that seek to serve society and build a better world amidst oppression. As scholars, these expressions of faith in our

readers, recognition of constructive projects, and accompaniment in the path of social action are also lessons to learn from and live by.

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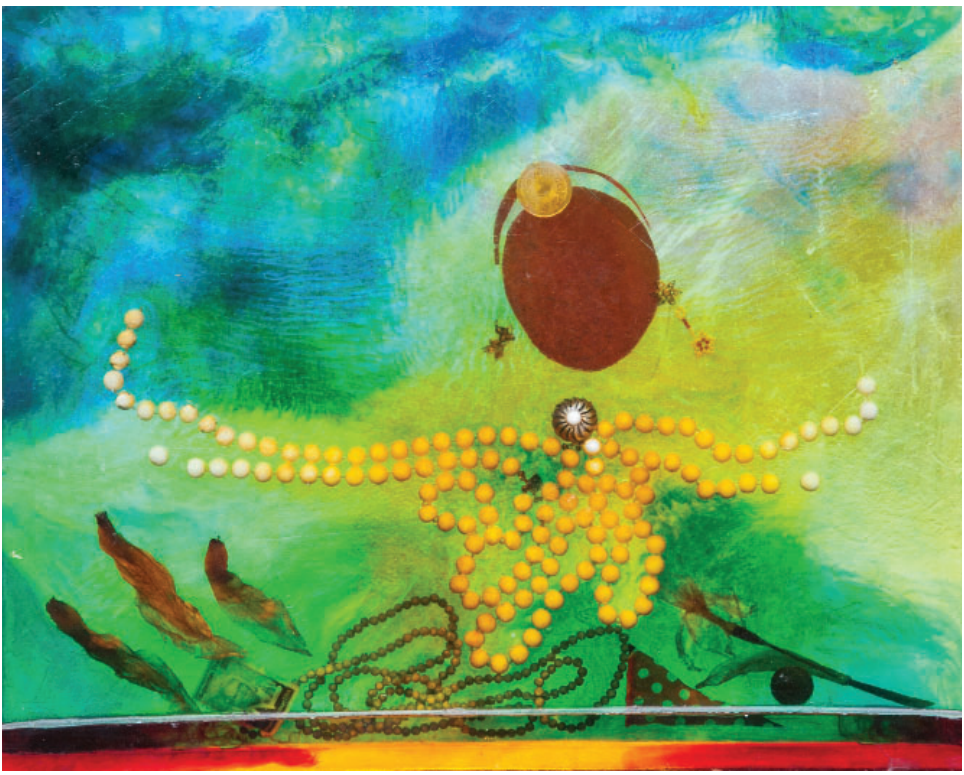

Sojourner Truth
M. BUNCH WASHINGTON

Vision and the Pursuit of Constructive Social Change

HOLLY HANSON

At this moment in history, when we are confronting the reality of systemic racism and when a global pandemic is revealing in deadly detail the consequences of extreme inequality, we need to pay attention to the process of social change.[1] The intolerable reality of African American men killed by police has drawn thousands of people around the world into public rejections of racist structures, symbols, and thought. The coronavirus lockdown has been a massive and powerful exposure of what is not working about the social structures we have. We have seen the inherent weakness in organizing our production of goods and food in gigantic factories far removed from the consumers of those products. We have seen the fundamental injustice of paying people less than a living wage and not giving them health care. The move away from normal life has illuminated what really does not work, and has motivated a desire for structures that are more conducive to human dignity.

But how do we pursue a path of constructive social change? How do we even recognize the direction that path would take? The question of seeing, of perceiving what is possible, is not simple, and part of our story as Americans and citizens of the world is that we have often made mistakes in the vision part of social change. To think about this, I will start with an analogy, make some observations about the elements of building new social structures, and then use examples from moments in African American history in the United States to explore how constructive social change involves a systematic cultivation of vision.

Social transformation is a process of clearing away the old and building the new, and both have to happen. It is easy to see this reality if we use an analogy. A sturdy house cannot be built on top of a house that already exists. If a family wants more space in their home, they will have to live with the mess of taking the old walls down. The room is not going to get bigger until they knock down the old walls. It is going to be dusty, and there is going to be a mess, and a lot of old construction material will pile up outside before it gets carried off to a landfill, but the family accepts the effort and the expense and the discomfort because they cannot have the better house, with the bigger windows and the larger space for children, unless they take down the old one. If some family members insist on a remodel that keeps the old house intact, without disturbing anything and without making a mess, not much is going to change.

1 This paper is based on a talk given on June 19, 2020, to an audience in the United States.

It is the same thing with society: if we want more room, more justice, and a better flow of resources, we cannot create new structures with social structures that hold injustice firmly in place. Perhaps they will fall apart on their own, perhaps they will collapse in a fight about their utility, but the structures that are not working will have to go. It is like the house, we cannot put new, more just and equitable social structures in a space occupied by other social structures. They need space. Taking down and building up are both essential processes for social change.

Strategies of constructive resilience enable people to overcome a fundamental challenge of trying to build social structures characterized by justice, which is that we cannot know where we are going as we begin. When people are building or remodeling a house, they have a plan. When the family starts to take down the old walls to make the children's bedroom bigger, they know what the next step will be. The old wall comes down, the foundation gets extended or whatever needs to be done, and then the family follows a plan to put up new walls in a new place. They know where they are going. It is harder to have a plan for social transformation. We cannot have plans like architectural drawings because if we live in a society characterized by injustice, we do not really know how to make social institutions that work differently. A failure of imagination is one reason efforts to create a more just society have often failed. It is naturally difficult for people to imagine any way of organizing society different from what they had before; too often, even well-intentioned efforts end up recreating it. That is what happened with the French Revolution—people set out on a process of figuring out how to have a society without the institutions they knew were oppressive, but they cleared away an old social structure and then built the same one over again. The French Revolution overthrew the king, but France had Napoleon Bonaparte as dictator ten years later. The Russian Revolution did away with the Czar and the nobility that controlled voice and wealth, but Russians' effort at learning how to put society together in a way that was more fair got derailed, and eventually they arrived back at a small elite that controlled voice and wealth. Seeing injustice, and working to be rid of it, was not enough.

Injustice distorts our perception of reality: our understanding of our own capacity as well as our ability to imagine a society with qualities our own does not have. Barbara Fields and Karen Fields describe this phenomenon in relation to the perception of the reality of race in the United States: "The destructive imagination that inflates the racecraft balloon sucks away oxygen from the constructive imagining that we urgently need, and does so to the disadvantage of all working Americans, not just black or white ones" (Fields and Fields 289). The Universal House of Justice observes that diminishing people's self-understanding is an intended consequence of a system of injustice, "deliberate oppression

aims at dehumanizing those whom it subjugates and at de-legitimizing them as members of society" (26 Nov. 2003). Therefore, those who are attempting to respond to oppression have to find a way to preserve their sense of themselves as noble beings capable of acting on and changing the world. Constructive resilience is a way of describing efforts at social transformation which sustain a movement towards fundamental change in the face of oppression that seeks to dehumanize.

Systematic learning is one of the strategies that characterizes constructive resilience. We cannot know what just social structures would actually be like, because we have never experienced them. But groups of people thinking together, asking questions, making efforts, and revising their understanding based on experience can move their thought and action away from injustice and toward justice. It takes decades, it takes a cultivation of collective will, and it takes the power of faith, but it is possible. We can set out on a process of social learning with a framework as a way to keep ourselves on track as we are learning.

So how do we set ourselves on a path of learning so we can create a system of community support and protection that keeps everyone safe, and an economy that works for everyone? How do we create the justice which is the foundation of unity? We need, in the words of the Universal House of Justice "a complete reconceptualization of the relationships that sustain society"—those between human beings and nature, between members of the family, between individuals, institutions, and communities, and between parts of the world. (2 Mar. 2013). We have been making the structures that now characterize the world over half a millennium, in a set of long-term, world-embracing patterns of change that includes the European conquest of other parts of the world, the colonial exploitation of Asians, Africans, and the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, the enslavement of Africans, and the design of industrial factories on the pattern of plantation slave labor. We are organized in relationships, but they do not work, they are unjust, they are dehumanizing. We are stuck inside these structures. We live inside a house of social institutions that was built with violence. It is unbearable, but not surprising, that violence, self-interest, and white supremacy are the frames of our house.

Another fundamental part of the structure is that power rests someplace else in society—it does not rest with us. In the United States and many other societies, many overt and subtle forces state that to be a good citizen is to make a salary, buy things with the money one earns, and vote. Society is shaped somewhere else; problems are solved somewhere else. If there are problems, it is our job to point them out, and to make sure the right people are elected to fix them. This withdrawal of responsibility for society is another part of the house of our ideas that has failed us, and we have to remove that pillar, too. The Universal House of Justice drew

attention to this when it wrote: "every nation and group—indeed, every individual—will, to a greater or lesser degree, contribute to the emergence of the world civilization towards which humanity is irresistibly moving" (2 Mar. 2013). This makes sense, because if what has become disturbed is the way we have relationships with others, a fundamental step will be learning to have different kinds of relationships. We might think that having the responsibility to create relationships which enable a restructuring of society is beyond our capacity. It might seem to be a frightening and overwhelming responsibility. Thinking we are powerless is part of our oppression.

Therefore, an essential part of the process of reconstructing the house of our society, is to take back our sense of responsibility for the wellbeing of the social whole. That is what communities engaged in constructive resilience are doing. To summarize, fundamental social progress requires the abandonment of social structures that are unjust and a systematic effort in which we all learn how to organize ourselves in a way that works better, and that takes a long time. Since the institutions of society that we have were built out of oppression, we have a major remodeling project on our hands. We have to learn new ways of thinking about, and new ways of organizing, all our relationships. Since oppression and injustice are embodied in relationships, and we are all constantly holding in place many kinds of relationships, every human being on earth is part of how we will make the change. That this change seems too hard results from our being oppressed by materialism, racism, and other negative forces, but the victims of oppression, and that is all of us, can transcend it through an inner strength that shields the soul from bitterness and hatred and which sustains consistent, principled action. That is constructive resilience.

Recognizing that social transformation requires both clearing away what doesn't work and systematically learning about what could be better helps us see the possibilities of this moment in the United States. It is not enough to know that social conditions are intolerable: to engage in profound, meaningful, permanent social building, there has to be a space for something new to develop, and we have to have a vision and a plan for how we are going to learn to implement it. Although they are perhaps not part of our conscious self-awareness, efforts to create a just, diverse, reciprocal community are part of our history from the earliest interactions of Indigenous communities with newly arrived strangers. This essay focusses on another powerful, inspiring history—also almost entirely neglected and forgotten: constructive, far-seeing society building among African Americans over the past two centuries can help us orient ourselves to the task we face.

At the moment that enslavement ended, African Americans were carefully and deliberately opening up

space for a different set of relationships among people than those they had been experiencing. In a brilliant book on African American ethics, Lynda Morgan tells the story of Mr. Jourdan Anderson. He had moved to Ohio from Tennessee, where he had been enslaved. Four months after the Emancipation Proclamation, he received a letter from his former owner, Mr. P. M. Anderson, asking him and his wife to come back to the farm where he had been enslaved to work for wages. Jourdan Anderson wrote back that his family was doing well. They were attending church, he had a job, and his children were in school. He asked Mr. P.M. Anderson, "can you match these amenities?" He also asked for back wages for the time he had worked for Anderson. He wrote "This will make us forgive and forget old scores and rely on your justice and friendship in the future." He had been enslaved for 32 years, and his wife had been enslaved for 20 years. Calculating the value of his labor at twenty-five dollars a week, and his wife's at two dollars a week, but subtracting the value of clothing and one doctor's and dentist's visit each year, he informed Anderson that by his reckoning, the total he was owed was $11,680 ($233,600 in current dollars) He wrote, "This balance will show what we are in justice entitled to. If you fail to pay us for faithful labors in the past we can have little faith in your promises in the future. Surely there will be a day of reckoning for those that defraud the laborer of their hire" (Anderson, quoted in Morgan, 13–14). Jourdan Anderson responded to the person who had taken the value of his labor for thirty-two years with an invitation to justice. His courteous letter asserted their mutual humanity and suggested the means to establishing reciprocity. He envisioned, and through his words created, a different kind of relationship.

The origins of the Juneteenth celebration carry the same kind of society-constructing purpose. June 19, 1865 was the day that enslaved people in Texas finally learned that they were free, two years after the Emancipation Proclamation. When the Confederate Army had broken up, warlords were controlling Texas, it was lawless, and slave owners were trying to push back the clock, until a Union army regiment landed in Galveston and read a proclamation: "The people of Texas are informed that, in accordance with a proclamation from the Executive of the United States, all slaves are free. This involves an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves" ("Juneteenth")

In the lawless circumstances in which the people who had held them enslaved continued to try to hold them down, the free Black people of Texas began to celebrate the nineteenth of June as a holiday. People dressed up, they gathered on property of Black landowners, they prayed, they listened to speeches by older people who had memories of enslavement, and they had celebratory meals. They were saying, *We know we are free, we know we have always deserved to be free, we know this is a cause for celebration*.

What we see, in the original Juneteenth celebration, is people responding to oppression with an expression of their profound conviction of the dignity and capacity of human beings, informed by a belief in God. We see formerly enslaved Texans acting in a way that acknowledged the humanity of oppressors and invited oppressors to behave in a way that expressed their human potential for goodness, and we see them making practical, concrete efforts to put into practice a vision of a more just society on every level—economically, socially, intellectually, and spiritually.

A profound, deliberate re-imagining of what the United States could be happened in the decades after the Civil War, a period labeled "Reconstruction." People were asking, *What kinds of social institutions can replace the ones built on slavery?* Their efforts actually focused on building new forms of political voice and new forms of economic organization. People were experimenting; they were trying to learn. The first free schools in the southern United States were organized by and for freedmen. These were not just the first free schools for African Americans but the first system of public education for anyone in that area. Formerly enslaved people built neighborhoods in which their ownership of homes and businesses asserted a plan for prosperity. Because the most highly skilled laborers in the United States had been enslaved people whose masters had hired them out and taken their wages, these workers moved directly into accumulating property and wealth. African American communities in those decades were a dense web of spaces for learning, such as debating societies and literary societies with a variety of social purposes.

African American and White craftsmen were also trying to learn how to harness industrial technology to collective generation of wealth. The 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s witnessed very deliberate efforts to create cooperative manufacturing: at least five hundred cooperatives opened in the twenty-five years after the Civil War. There were mines, foundries, mills, and factories making barrels, clothes, shoes, soap, and furniture. There were cooperative laundries, cooperative printers, and cooperative lumberjacks. The Knights of Labor, an organization which had fundamental problems but also admirable goals, at its peak had 800,000 members, was racially integrated, and included women as workers, members, and leaders. The Knights of Labor actually had Black elected leaders, but they did not put those people on their posters of their leaders, because the organization did not want to cause their African American leaders to be lynched. The people involved thought that a widespread economic democracy and a cooperative commonwealth would emerge through their efforts to learn how to work together in a new way, and intense efforts of communities to learn together characterized this period of time (Gordon Nembhard, 48–52).

That effort to learn how to build a new kind of society was deliberately

ended, and the turning back was so successful we have forgotten that it even happened. The so-called "Redemption," which stopped the innovation and sought to put African Americans back into a space of absolute oppression, was fueled not only by racism, but also by the wealthiest and most powerful element of American society, which feared the power of Black and White laborers joining together. It was absolutely a war on Black people, but it was also a war on working people, and it very deliberately sought to create racial animosity in the White working class. This was the moment that statues honoring Confederate heroes were built. It was also a time of war on cooperatives. John Curl, a historian of cooperation in the United States, writes that, "railroads refused to haul their products, manufacturers refused to sell them needed machinery; wholesalers refused them raw materials and supplies; banks wouldn't lend" (106).

In the early twentieth century, African American leaders focused on how to build prosperity through cooperation within the confines of Jim Crow segregation laws. W.E.B. Du Bois initiated an annual Negro Businesses and Cooperatives Conference because he saw cooperation as a way of responding to oppression. He framed a vision of social transformation to those gathered at the 1907 conference in Atlanta: "We unwittingly stand at the crossroads—should we go the way of capitalism and try to become individually rich as capitalists, or should we go the way of cooperatives and economic cooperation where we and our whole community could be rich together?" (qtd. in Gordon Nembhard 260).

We can see a focus on learning in how African American communities established cooperatives. They usually began in churches, and in order to start them, people had to have a study circle, and they had to study for a year together to develop the skills they needed. Many, once they were started, did not succeed, but they still had an effect because their participants had built skills. They existed until the risk of being labelled communists in the McCarthy era made cooperation dangerous.

We all need to know the history which demonstrates we have social structures that need to be removed, and we need to know and value the efforts people have made to take down those structures. In the United States, we need to be aware of the nineteenth-century violence of "Redemption" after Reconstruction and the twentieth-century violence of lynchings and massacres, such as the one in Tulsa, in order to truly grasp the enormity of what has to be remade. It is important to be inspired by the history of the Civil Rights Movement, but that is not enough.

We also need to learn from the efforts people have made to build a different kind of social house. We need to see what people did because their faith in God gave them faith in themselves, because we can learn from them how to do it in the present. Their songs can protect us, their sacrifices can inspire

us, their experiments can inform ours. When we look, we will see Indigenous peoples, landless Nicaraguan farmworkers, Zanzibari women, Iranians denied education, African Americans across the generations, and so many others whose connection to God gave them an alternative understanding of power. We will find well-developed and deliberate forms of community education, initiated by groups who have had a vision of a direction they wanted to move. We will see forms of community economy that have harnessed the power of reciprocity and cooperation to combine collective goals with individual need and effort. We see carefully built, dense webs of social connection on the local level, which have served as a locus for agency and self-expression for people determined to make nobility visible. This is the source of the vision we need to build the social structures we want.

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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 bahaistudies.ca/publications/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.

The Journal of Bahá'í Studies