

“To build in the world of things a safe home for the children of men”

A couple of months ago, I was fortunate enough to hear Douglas Martin give a talk in Vancouver on “Historical Consciousness and the Divine Plan”, into which he dropped the quotation I have taken for the title of this talk. “To build a safe home for the children of men”. This wonderful phrase (which comes from a 1912 book titled *The Common Faith of Common Men*, by the Reverend Rockwell Harmon Potter, Minister to the First Church of Christ, Hartford, Connecticut) stuck in my head, because it also expresses the aim of the Bahá’í Faith. As we all know, Bahá’u’lláh refers to Himself as “He Who hath come to build anew the whole world” (*Gleanings*, p. 99). Furthermore, He says that He has given the “the rulers and ministers of the world that which is conducive to safety and protection, tranquillity and peace; haply the children of men may rest secure from the evils of oppression” and directs “the men of God's House of Justice” to occupy themselves with “the training of peoples, the upbuilding of nations, the protection of man and the safeguarding of his honour” (TB, p. 125).

This motif of destruction and construction—or reconstruction—runs through the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and the Guardian. We know that the “wondrous System” that Bahá’u’lláh has brought into the world has “revolutionized” “mankind's ordered life” (*Gleanings*, p. 136) and He is “[rolling] up the world” and “[spreading] out a new order in its stead” (*Gleanings*, p. 313). Writing to the Bahá’ís in the West in October 1940, Shoghi Effendi urged them, amidst the chaos and tragedy of world events, to work for “the spiritual redemption of a reconstructed mankind” (*Messages to America*, p. 43)

This ‘construction project’ has been with the Bahá’í community since its inception, and was given particular focus by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the Tablets of the Divine Plan. Today, I’d like to look at its most recent elaboration by the Universal House of Justice, beginning with the Four Year Plan (1996-2000), which was followed by the Twelve-Month Plan, and then a series of Five Year Plans that will us to the end of the first century of the Faith’s Formative Age. These Plans, the Universal House of Justice tells us, “have been designed as progressive steps in achieving [a] change of Bahá’í culture” (August 22, 2002). In my talk today, I want to look at how this culture—which has been referred to at different times by the House of Justice as a culture of growth, a teaching culture, and a learning culture—is being changed consciously, deliberately, and systematically.

As we know, the objective, the single focus, of this series of plans is “an advance in the process of entry by troops”. And with that in mind, the very interesting and exciting question becomes “how do we get there?”

A few general comments about change in the context of the Bahá’í community and the current series of Plans:

To look at how we are going about achieving this deliberate change in culture, I’m going to use as a framework a series of points developed by Michael Karlberg in his book *Beyond the Culture of Contest*. But before I get to that, I think it would be good to make a few general comments about the nature of this change.

- First, we are seeking “individual and collective transformation within the framework of authoritative guidance” (L 47). Through the provisions of the Covenant, the Bahá’í community remains united and firmly founded on the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh and around the Institutions He established, particularly the Universal House of Justice. So while it “will welcome an infinite diversity in regard to secondary characteristics,” it will “also firmly uphold unity in relation to fundamental principles”, and it is always “The teachings of Bahá’u’lláh [that] constitute a divine standard for determining what aspects of a particular culture are to be retained” (The Universal House of Justice, Dec 16, 1998).
- As a community seeking to arrive at higher and higher levels of understanding of how to build a spiritual civilization, how to serve the needs of humanity, we bring forward our varied perspectives, taking care to do so in an atmosphere of unity and self-discipline. And after we consult, we act and then we reflect on our action.
- And always, as Paul Lample writes in his new volume *Revelation and Social Reality*, we are seeking “a dynamic unity, not perpetual criticism and contention” (L 51). Describing the series of Plans beginning in 1996 and leading up to 2021, he writes, “During this period, the community will transform its understandings, its patterns of life, and many aspects of its institutional arrangements. The change of Bahá’í culture is the fruit of a change in the Bahá’í approach to understanding and practice—how we understand what is written and translate it into reality and action—as it pertains to the growth of the Faith” (L 76).

Michael Karlberg’s framework and current processes of change

Having made those few general comments, let’s go on to look at the factors that Michael Karlberg outlines as necessary in the achievement of cultural change:

1. Denaturalize cultural practices

- Move away from “*congregational*” *model* practices (characteristic of Western religious denominations) towards more active, engaged “community” model—emphasis on individual initiative (but within the framework of the current Plan). As the Universal House of Justice wrote to an individual on August 22, 2002:
To mistakenly identify Bahá’í community life with the mode of religious activity that characterizes the general society—in which the believe is a member of a congregation, leadership comes from an individual or individuals presumed to be qualified for the purpose, and personal participation is fitted into a schedule dominated by concerns of a very different nature—can only have the effect of marginalizing the Faith and robbing the community of the spiritual vitality available to it.
- Changes in *community interactions through home visits*
- Decentering of community life from administrative activities
- Moving *from centralized to grassroots initiatives*
- Changes in *teaching practices* (e.g. accepted “formal fireside” model, “proclamation-style” presentations—information-giving vs. direct teaching; “outreach”)

- Changes in *children's classes* (centralized, Bahá'í-only to neighbourhood for everybody)
 - Changes in Feasts, Fund contribution patterns, etc.
2. **Change psycho-structural dimensions of the culture** (attitudes, values, beliefs, response tendencies acquired via social learning) through raising awareness, rethinking values/identities, reforming attitudes and beliefs—and reinforcing these through social institutions

The process of reforming the Bahá'í community's views about that mysterious thing called "entry by troops" really began during the Four Year Plan and was articulated by the Universal House of Justice in the Ridván 1996 letter to the Bahá'ís of the World, in which the House said that the three participants in the Plan, the individual, the institutions, and the community: "can **foster such growth [1] first by spiritually and mentally accepting the possibility of it, and [2] then by working towards embracing masses of new believers, [3] setting in motion the means for effecting their spiritual and administrative training and development...**"

The necessity of this mental shift was reiterated by the House of Justice again a few years later, when it stated explicitly to an individual that "old modes of thinking, which, while valuable in many respects, have not been conducive to rapid growth" (14 August 2002, letter written on behalf of the UHJ to an individual believer)

And so, the Bahá'í community began to transform into a "*learning culture*" throughout the Four Year Plan, which really focused on "consciously cultivating a capacity for learning in the Bahá'í world" (L 60). The vehicle for this was the *training institute*, with its "very practical" goal of "raising up ... large numbers of believers ... trained to foster and facilitate the process of entry by troops with efficiency and love" (*Training Institutes*, April 1998). And, it is important to note, the training institute materials are entirely centered on the Sacred Word. (Of course, we also had to learn what "training" meant and transform our attitudes to what many of us initially saw as rather simple study courses, but gradually we have been learning through experience how to benefit fully from them.)

And so by January 17, 2003, the Universal House of Justice was able to speak of "the culture of learning that is taking root everywhere, as the Bahá'í world community focuses on advancing the process of entry by troops."

Paul Lample describes this culture as "characterized by dialogue rather than debate, by constructive experience at the grassroots rather than elaborate planning from the top, by systematization rather than freneticism, by reflective refinement rather than derogatory criticism" (L 60-61). The method is not "mechanical formulas or rigid instructions"; rather, Mr. Lample notes, the House of Justice "opens an arena for action, encourages a diversity of responses worldwide, promotes learning to determine the most effective patterns of action, and unites the global community behind proven practices" (L 49).

With the system of training in place, the Five Year Plan (2001-2006) turned the friends' attention more towards the cultivation of individual initiative, particularly related to teaching, and the need to establish an environment of "sustained encouragement"—"a culture of growth ... in which the believers see their duty to teach as a natural consequence of having accepted Bahá'u'lláh." In this culture, "teaching is the dominating passion of the lives of the believers. Fear of failure finds no place. Mutual support, commitment to learning, and appreciation of diversity of action are the prevailing norms. (UHJ, January 9, 2001)

"By addressing the challenge of expansion and consolidation through learning, the community was able to overcome the paralysis originating in debates on the best method of teaching and arguments about the success or failure of particular initiatives. It also began to move beyond the freneticism and stagnation that comes from a relativistic tendency to encourage all methods and activities according to personal preference, undermining the critical thought necessary for the cultivation and diffusion of ever-more effective action. The result was an integration of various activities into a vibrant and sustainable pattern of growth, resulting not only in quantitative but also qualitative change" (L 105), as the Universal House of Justice noted in its 27 December 2005 letter to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

- With the emphasis on placed on teaching, especially direct teaching, in these plans, it is important to be clear about what we mean by "teaching the Faith":
 - "...far from a narrow concern with increasing membership, the purpose of teaching others about the Faith is 'to attract human beings to the divine Message and so imbue them with its spirit that they will dedicate themselves to its service, and this world will become another world and its people another people'" (L 67; UHJ Messages 1963-86, p. 301)

Section IX of the document *Century of Light* offers a succinct synopsis of the challenges and the progress of the Bahá'í community in developing the human resources necessary to sustain growth. As the Universal House of Justice described it in a letter to an individual on August 22, 2002:

These passages of the document seek to acquaint believers everywhere with the profound change in Bahá'í culture that the preceding decades of struggle, achievement and disappointment made possible and that was capitalized on through the agency of the Four Year Plan.

- Another change in the psycho-structural dimension of Bahá'í community life relates to what we call an "**outward looking orientation**" that we have adopted
 - opening of study circles, children's classes, and devotional meetings "to all the inhabitants of the locality" from the beginning of the 5YP (2001-06) signaled a change in the culture of Bahá'í communities (BM p. 19).

- “The culture now emerging is one in which groups of Bahá'u'lláh's followers explore together the truths in His Teachings, freely open their study circles, devotional gatherings and children's classes to their friends and neighbours, and invest their efforts confidently in plans of action designed at the level of the cluster, that makes growth a manageable goal.” (UHJ, August 22, 2002)
 - Bahá'ís are striving to expand their social circles and ultimately their friendships, as friendship is the surest foundation for touching the hearts.
 - examination and reordering of priorities to allow more time to develop relationships and teach
 - understand more deeply the forces operating on the world stage and the solutions offered by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh; sincerely voiced and genuinely felt expressions of solidarity with our fellow human beings (BM p. 19)
- Throughout, these changes in attitudes and efforts to increase understanding of the concepts have been reinforced by the Institution of the Counsellors as well as by the elected institutions at every level

3. Change socio-structural dimensions of the culture (social institutions that represent structures of authority that constrain and cultivate attitudes, ideas, behaviours)—(recalling that institutions are one of the three participants in the Plan)

- ◆ the system of training institutes established throughout the world—the “chief propellant of this change” and designated by the House of Justice in its Ridván 2000 letter as “the single greatest legacy of the Four Year Plan” in the field of expansion and consolidation
- ◆ the devising of the construct of the cluster and agencies functioning at the cluster level: a “construct” of a size where systematic plans can be devised and enacted, making growth “a manageable goal”
- ◆ functioning of Assemblies—widening of vision to incorporate all the inhabitants of a locality, resetting of priorities
- ◆ changes in Feasts

4. Change the community's discursive constructs (cultural ways of talking and thinking about things that influence the way we act in relation to those things):

New terminology or existing terms used in new ways—more than 100 such terms

- “outward looking orientation”
- “accompaniment”:

With the release of Book 7 of the Ruhi Institute curriculum, understanding grew that “tutors were not to merely assist the friends to move through the courses”; rather, they were to “[accompany] participants in their initial attempts to perform acts of service” (L 99; UHJ 27 December 2005), thus

increasing “the number of active supporters of the Faith in a self-perpetuating manner” (UHJ Ridván 2006)

- “practices”
- “path of service”

and discourse (ongoing formal conversation—our “scaffolding for human talk, thought and practice”—which both enables and limits us)—which has been deeply affected by our involvement with the training institute materials, all centered on the Sacred Word. A couple of examples of recent evolution in our discourse

- ◆ ***who we are and how we talk about ourselves***, both within the Bahá’í community and in the wider community; Bahá’ís participating in the framework for action will often describe themselves in terms of service (e.g. a teacher of a class for the spiritual education of children)—expressed in a language of humility while at the same time conveying confidence in the framework for action and safeguarding the majesty of Bahá’u’lláh. We talk about ourselves as part of the community in a neighbourhood, not as outsiders—as people who are also affected by the environment but who have transcended it to some extent.
- ◆ ***how we speak about the Bahá’í Faith***, emphasizing that this is “the changeless faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future”—focusing on the oneness of religion, which suggests indivisibility, in contrast to the unity of religions, which suggests multiplicity. Avoiding the tendency to see ourselves as just another religion among many
- ◆ ***how we speak about the core activities***: as a paradigm of empowerment, which belongs to the entire community, in which we can partner in developing skills that will lead to the betterment of the world
- ◆ ***how we talk about teaching*** (avoiding the creation of 2 languages, one for seekers and the other for the community)

5. **Change comprehensive discursive formations**—“a constellation of relevant discourses that characterize a given culture at a given historical time and within which its members are born, grow and develop, and learn ‘normal’ ways of thinking, talking and acting” (K 14). In the context of the culture of growth and learning that we are building, we see

- Discursive formations surrounding the various aspects of an ***intensive program of growth***: the requirements of various phases of a cycle; discourses about teaching and consolidation; consultation, action, and reflection; the discourse surrounding “coherence” among the core activities in a neighbourhood, etc.
- The adoption of these new comprehensive discursive formations is particularly evident in youth and junior youth.
- In some clusters, we are beginning to see as well large numbers of new believers for whom the three-month rhythm of cycles of growth, the activities of study circles, devotional meetings, neighbourhood children’s classes and the JYP are entirely natural.

- Discourses surrounding “*social action*”—moving beyond a “project” orientation towards the recognition that social action has a great range, from individual actions such as teaching children’s classes to actions that improve the neighbourhood to complex organizations for SED

Our challenge is to remember that our culture constructs these “discursive environments” and therefore they are not permanent; “they can be reformed” (K 15).

A True Change in Culture

These, then, are some of the features of this new culture of growth that are of concern to the Bahá’í community around the entire world.

Yet the House of Justice has cautioned the friends that they must be careful to move beyond “adopting the outer form of the activities of the Five Year Plan”, which would bring change only to the “surface culture” of the Bahá’í community (defined as overt, visual manifestations of the culture) rather than its “deep culture” (which pertains to people’s attitudes, emotions, impressions, and thought processes). As the Universal House of Justice told the National Spiritual Assembly of Canada in 2006, that while establishing its projected number of intensive programs of growth was a laudable goal, “Such a bold objective cannot be achieved merely by adopting the outer form of the activities of the Five Year Plan. Rather, **a true change in culture** is required.”

Some of the features of this true change in culture:

- an eager embrace of the approaches explored in the institute courses,
- a diligent cultivation of community life through the multiplication of core activities, and
- an audacious outreach and effective teaching among receptive populations

These, the House says, “are **some** of the many elements of the Plan described in the 27 December 2005 message **that must be integrated into a single, coherent pattern of action** through the determined efforts of the friends.”

Challenges to changing culture:

- ♦ Cultural hegemony, a concept developed by Antonio Gramsci, is the domination of a particular population by certain social classes through cultural leadership, which normalizes “particular ways of thinking, talking and acting” and marginalizes others, causing the population to resist change, even if the change is in their best interests (K 20-21)
 - Hegemony of the wider culture, which is expressed, in part, in a fragmentary approach to life (work fits in this box, social life in this box, recreation in this box, religion in this box) exerts an influence, a kind of cultural drag, on the Bahá’í community as well, since we are part of the wider culture, but, as the Universal House of Justice tells us:
 - “As *a body of people who are being steadily freed by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh from the "gravitational pull", so to speak, of the cultures in which their habits of mind have been formed*, the community already has a unique approach to the exploration of reality.

This approach needs to be sharply honed as an ever more effective instrument of social transformation.” (UHJ, July 20, 1997)

- Also a hegemony of the culture of the Bahá’í community as it was functioning before this guided process of cultural change began, e.g.
 - Resistance to direct teaching, neighbourhood outreach, equation of direct teaching with door-to-door approach, which is in turn equated to proselytizing
 - Feeling that the Local Spiritual Assembly has been supplanted by cluster agencies
 - Resistance to training materials developed in another part of the world and the conviction that they will not work here

Overcoming challenges:

- “..changes...are contingent upon our ability to *recognize the historical specificity of our cultural environment and to step outside of it*, if only in our imaginations at first...” (K 22).
 - The requirement stated by the Universal House of Justice to *spiritually and mentally accept the possibility of growth* as a first step (spiritual and mental acceptance suggests a deeper conviction beyond cognition)
 - And further, if we believe that we are “*advancing the process*” then we are *recognizing that the process is already underway*, albeit at different stages in different communities (UHJ Ridván 1996)
 - Then, what we need to do is to *work towards it*—to which end the House and the International Teaching Centre have been systematically guiding us, educating us, training us.
 - Through practice and experience, this “acceptance” is evolving into joyous enthusiasm!
 - Continuous guidance from the senior institutions of the Faith that guide our path forward and expand our vision, as in the October 20 2008 message of the Universal House of Justice, which tells us not to “underestimate the power inherent in the system” nor to “mistake the true purpose” of this “global enterprise”. Neither should we “deviate from the path of learning” we are on nor “be distracted by the ephemeral pursuits of a bewildered society.” And finally, we should “not fail to appreciate the value of the culture now taken root in the community”—a culture “that promotes the systematic study of the Creative Word in small groups in order to build capacity for service.”

A few final points:

1. Scholarly activities should play a role in the exploration of reality related to the development of this new culture. As the Universal House of Justice wrote back in 1997:

It is apparent that the crisis of contemporary civilization is impelling thinkers in many lands to explore new scholarly methodologies capable of coming to grips with spiritual, moral, cultural, and social phenomena not hitherto encountered. No segment of humanity is so well equipped as the Bahá’í community to take a

leading role in this effort. As a body of people who are being steadily freed by the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh from the "gravitational pull", so to speak, of the cultures in which their habits of mind have been formed, the community already has a unique approach to the exploration of reality. This approach needs to be sharply honed as an ever more effective instrument of social transformation. The devising of the new scholarly paradigm called for by this circumstance offers a priceless opportunity of service and achievement to those Bahá'ís who enjoy the dual gifts of spiritual faith and intellectual faculties trained in the best that contemporary society has to offer. (UHJ, July 20, 1997, Scholarship and Related Subjects)

2. The culture we are developing is one of *unity in diversity*. As the Universal House of Justice wrote at Ridván 1990, we need to be able to accommodate “a wide range of actions” while keeping our focus on expansion and consolidation. A unity in diversity of actions is called for, a condition in which different individuals will concentrate on different activities, appreciating the salutary effect of the aggregate on the growth and development of the Faith, because each person cannot do everything and all persons cannot do the same thing. This understanding is important to the maturity which, by the mean demands being made upon it, the community is being forced to attain”

We know that this is a teaching culture, in which “teaching is the dominating passion of the lives of the believers,” and it is also a *culture of spiritual empowerment*, in which “Fear of failure finds no place. Mutual support, commitment to learning, and appreciation of diversity of action are the prevailing norms” (UHJ, Jan 9, 2001).

While the House of Justice counsels us to set priorities in our service, they have also stated that “All can find some part to play in the multifaceted requirements of their clusters.” There is a place for everyone in this Plan, and there should be no suggestion, no hint, of division between those who are “with the Plan” and others who are perceived as not being with it. Any whiff of superiority from those who are considered “with it” or grumblings of dissatisfaction from those who are considered “not with it” would be counterproductive to building unity among ourselves, let alone building a spiritual civilization into which all of humanity will be welcomed.

A culture is enriched by varied contributions. If our individual initiative is “disciplined by an understanding of the requirements of systematic action in advancing the process of entry by troops”, if we undertake tasks “in a humble posture of learning within the framework defined by the Plan”, then we can avoid falling into the tendency of dichotomous thinking; we will see “activities that give expression to a diversity of talents become harmonized into one forward movement”, and we will avoid “the stagnation caused by endless debate over personal preferences about approach” (UHJ 27 Dec 2005).

In *Revelation and Social Reality*, Paul Lample speaks to the qualities necessary to the success of our endeavour:

Applying knowledge for constructive change in the Bahá'í community does not involve self-certainty or self-interest, but self-sacrifice. It involved doing what is right, not becoming self-righteous. It sometimes requires suffering, which is an

inevitable aspect of trying to champion justice. It involves absorbing the pain and anger of others and returning love and compassion in an effort to build unity. It involves demonstrating patience when understanding is lacking or capacity is undeveloped. It involves exercising power to shape and release human capacity for the advancement of the Cause and the well-being of humanity. It requires intellectual capacity to generate new knowledge, but wisdom to convey that knowledge—which can sometimes be challenging and disconcerting in the face of generally accepted belief and practice—in a manner appropriate to context. It involves proceeding with humility and flexibility to continue to grow and learn and to foster learning in others. (L 65)

And as we work, let us remember why this work is so important:

First, “the crying need of a humanity that, bereft of spiritual sustenance, is sinking deeper into despair” (Ridván 2006)

Second, “the urgency of the responsibility to teach with which we each have been entrusted as members of the community of the Greatest Name” (Ridván 2006)

And ultimately, the vision of the world civilization and culture for which Bahá’u’lláh has given us the blueprint, and which we are beginning to build—a civilization and culture which, in their plenitude “should... be regarded, as far as this planetary life is concerned, as the furthestmost limits in the organization of human society...” (Shoghi Effendi, *WOB*, p. 163).

May we all, in whatever capacity we are moved and within the framework of guidance we have been given by the Universal House of Justice, participate in this most great construction project, the building of “a safe home for the children of men”.