

# THE JOURNAL OF BAHÁ'Í STUDIES

*La Revue des Études Bahá'ies/La Revista de Estudios Bahá'ís*

**Volume 26, number 3**

**Fall 2016**



*A Publication of the Association for Bahá'í Studies—North America*

# THE JOURNAL OF BAHÁ'Í STUDIES

LA REVUE DES ÉTUDES BAHÁ'ÍES/LA REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS BAHÁ'ÍS

Volume 26 Number 3 Fall 2016

Publications Mail  
Registration No. 09448

EDITOR John S. Hatcher

GUEST EDITORS: Linda S. Covey, Roshan Danesh

POETRY EDITOR Peter E. Murphy

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT Nilufar Gordon

EDITORIAL COMMITTEE Roshan Danesh, Mehran Kiai, Pierre-Yves Mocuais,  
Bahhaj Taherzadeh

*The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* (USPS #013-468) is published by the Association for Bahá'í Studies–North America. Periodicals postage paid at Champlain, NY, and additional mailing offices. Postmaster: Address changes should be sent to IMS of NY, 100 Walnut St. #3, P.O. Box 1518, Champlain, NY, USA 12919-1518. For details call IMS at 1(800) 428-3003.

Articles in *The Journal of Bahá'í Studies* are available on EBSCO Publishing's aggregated database. This journal is abstracted in *Science of Religion Abstracts*, *Religion Index One: Periodicals*, *Index Islamicus*, and *Index to Book Reviews in Religion (Religion Indexes: RIO/RIT/IBRR 1975– on CD-ROM and ATLA Religion Database on CD-ROM* published by American Theological Library Association, 250 S. Wacker Dr., 16th Flr., Chicago, IL 60606; e-mail: <atla@atla.com>; Web site: <www.atla.com>), and catalogued at the Institut de L'Information Scientifique et Technique.

Membership in the Association for Bahá'í Studies–North America includes a subscription to the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*. Membership application is available at <www.bahai-studies.ca>. Annual membership fees: individual: \$70; couple: \$85; full-time student/unwaged/senior: \$40; institutional memberships: \$85. Library subscriptions to the Journal only (which do not include membership) are available for \$90/year. Single copies: \$20/issue. All orders outside Canada must be in US funds. Correspondence regarding membership/subscriptions should be addressed to Association for Bahá'í Studies, 34 Copernicus Street, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 7K4 Canada. E-mail: <abs-na@bahai-studies.ca>. Tel.: 613-233-1903. Address editorial correspondence to <editor@bahai-studies.ca>.

Printed in Canada on recycled paper.

ISSN 0838-0430

© Association for Bahá'í Studies 2016. All rights reserved.

French translation: Louise Mailhot and Juliette Goudreau

Spanish translation: Nuriyeh McLaren

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](http://www.bahai.org)) available in several languages. For article submission guidelines, please visit <http://bahai-studies.ca/the-journal-of-bahai-studies-submission-guidelines/>.

## ABOUT THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

# THE JOURNAL OF BAHÁ'Í STUDIES

LA REVUE DES ÉTUDES BAHÁ'ÍES/LA REVISTA DE ESTUDIOS BAHÁ'ÍS

Volume 26 Number 3 Fall 2016

## Contents

- 3 LINDA S. COVEY and ROSHAN DANESH From the Editor's Desk
- 7 JOYCE BALDWIN Walking the Spiritual Path with Both Feet Planted  
Firmly on the Ground
- 23 PATRICIA VERGE A Personal Journey toward Reconciliation
- 43 LINDA S. COVEY A Necessary History:  
Teaching On and Off the Reservations
- 65 CHELSEA HORTON Building Intercultural Community:  
Insights from Indigenous Bahá'í History
- 89 ALFRED KAHN JR. Encouragement, Challenges, Healing and Progress:  
The Bahá'í Faith in Indigenous Communities

### *Illustrations*

- 2 The First Local Spiritual Assembly of Macy, Nebraska.
- 64 Great Council Fire, February 1963.
- 88 Patricia Locke

103 *Biographical Notes*

*Cover:* RICHARD SHORTY Salmon



Members of the Omaha Nation form the first all-Native American  
Local Spiritual Assembly in Macy, Nebraska, in 1948.  
*(Photo courtesy of National Bahá'í Archives, United States)*

# From the Editor's Desk

LINDA S. COVEY AND  
ROSHAN DANESH

In 1916 'Abdu'l-Bahá instructed the nascent Bahá'í communities of the United States and Canada to "attach great importance to the indigenous population of America" because of the unique potential of those peoples to "enlighten the whole world" (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel* 16). 'Abdu'l-Bahá penned these words as part of His blueprint for the unfoldment of the Divine Plan, which would assist in the dissemination of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation and the advancement of the goal of creating patterns of justice, equality, and peace among all the peoples of the world.

At the time of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's message, there were no Indigenous Bahá'ís in North America, and Indigenous peoples in Canada and the United States were enduring exceptionally egregious treatment. In both countries, colonial oppression, racist laws, and policies fueled by Social Darwinism, missionary zeal, and disease had decimated Indigenous populations and communities and disconnected them from their traditional lands, family and community systems, and governmental structures. Far from recognizing the "great importance" of Indigenous peoples to the "whole world," both Canada and the United States continued to establish a network of

residential schools, which in some places remained active well into the 1990s. These schools were devised expressly to break up Indigenous families and communities, separate children from their culture and identity, and destroy languages and cultures. As has become fully apparent to the broader Canadian public only in recent years, although justified as advancing civilization, the residential schools were, in fact, utterly pernicious vehicles for systematically imposing physical, psychological, cultural, social, and spiritual harm. This same realization caused the United States to pass the Indian Child Welfare Act in 1978 and to gradually cease allotting federal funds to these residential schools.

For the small Bahá'í communities of Canada and the United States, fueled by the core Bahá'í teaching of unity in diversity, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's emphasis on the importance of Indigenous peoples presented a challenge to establish a pattern of thought and course of action distinct from that of the broader society, a plan that had to include recognition of the value of diversity and the importance of culture, love, and inclusion in community building. This challenge led to an increasing intersection between Bahá'ís and Indigenous peoples in the 1920s and 1930s, including more systematic efforts by Bahá'ís to reach out, share Bahá'u'lláh's message of fellowship and unity, and create a diverse Bahá'í community.

In the 1960s these efforts expanded massively, sustained by the leadership and dedication of both Indigenous

and non-Indigenous Bahá'ís, including Bahá'í leaders such as Amat'ul-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánúm, who traveled to meet Indigenous peoples across the Americas on their lands and in their homes. Through these efforts, the unifying message of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation was shared, and the Bahá'ís' commitment to a new pattern of just relations between diverse peoples was visibly demonstrated.

Over the past number of decades, in addition to ongoing and strenuous efforts of individual Indigenous and non-Indigenous Bahá'ís, there have been a wide range of institutional initiatives to create new structures, campaigns, and gatherings aimed at encouraging and deepening the presence of, respect for, and recognition of Indigenous peoples within the Bahá'í community. To be clear, in the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith, there is no naïve or simplistic utopian perspective about the challenge faced by society to extricate itself from patterns of oppression and injustice and replace them with relationships based on unity and peace. Such work is slow, arduous, and multi-generational. It requires recognition that while this important work progresses, individual Bahá'ís and Bahá'í communities will inevitably be influenced by the broader dynamics and forces in society, even while striving to be guided by and to become compliant with the ideals, standards, and goals set forth in the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. As Shoghi Effendi emphasized in 1956:

the condition that the world is in, is bringing many issues to a head.

It would be impossible to find a nation or people not in a state of crisis today. The materialism, the lack of true religion and the consequent baser forces in human nature which are being released, have brought the whole world to the brink of probably the greatest crisis it has ever faced or will have to face. The Bahá'ís are a part of the world. They too feel the great pressures which are brought to bear upon all people today, whoever and wherever they may be. (Letter dated 19 July 1956, qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* no. 440)

Reflecting on the complexity of transforming entrenched patterns, Shoghi Effendi further emphasized that eradicating racial injustice requires not only “complete freedom from prejudice,” but also demands that society address the reality that racism is sufficiently pernicious that it can infect “the whole social structure” (*Advent* 22, 33).

Accomplishing this essential change 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.

For these reasons, in their efforts to contribute to the advancement of society, Bahá'ís have been broadly



encouraged by the Universal House of Justice to recognize that the believers must pursue a “wide latitude for action,” must be granted “a large margin for mistakes,” should recognize that “human beings are not perfect,” and in light of these realizations, seek to foster encouragement and not succumb to criticism at the “slightest provocation” (Letter dated 19 May 1994 to a National Spiritual Assembly ¶7).

For these same reasons, having Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples coming together in new ways to build a community that actualizes Bahá'u'lláh's teachings about unity in diversity engendered, in the process, the expected trials and sacrifice, as well as progress and achievements. The experience of Indigenous peoples within the Bahá'í community, and the Bahá'í community's experience of engaging with Indigenous peoples, has been at times contiguous with predominant patterns seen in society at large and, at others, drastically different. While there has been conscious striving to infuse a commitment to the spiritual and social imperative of unity—including valuing the distinctiveness and diversity of Indigenous peoples—in efforts at forming new patterns of community life, there have also been complex challenges, such as the need to confront old world order patterns and attitudes.

This special issue of the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* is a beginning effort to explore some of the complexities of the history of the intersection between Indigenous peoples and the Bahá'í Faith. It comes at a particularly propitious moment—exactly a century

after 'Abdu'l-Bahá articulated the importance of Indigenous peoples in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan. It is also an opportune moment because of broader societal dynamics. For example, in recent years Canada has been awakening to the fact that one of its central social, political, cultural, economic, and spiritual challenges is that of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Likewise, in an ongoing effort to recognize the American Indians and their cultural presence and distinctive history, the United States declared 1992 as the “Year of the American Indian” and designated the month of November as National American Indian Heritage Month.

There is growing global awareness of how essential it is that the world's approximately four hundred million Indigenous peoples be recognized and that their rights as individuals, communities, and nations be fully acknowledged and respected. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007)—now fully endorsed by many countries around the world, including the United States and Canada—establishes one of the necessary foundations for the full participation of Indigenous peoples in human affairs.

It is in this context that the contributors in this issue of the *Journal* offer a wide range of voices and perspectives on the intersection between the Bahá'í Faith and Indigenous peoples. Linda Covey's article, based on a specific case study that identifies critical outcomes regarding Bahá'í teaching work among Indigenous populations,



provides valuable insights about those skill-sets and sensitivities required for this important endeavor. Joyce Baldwin and Alfred Kahn Jr. share their personal stories, providing us with a window into their lived experience as Indigenous Bahá'ís and conveying the wisdom and insights derived from decades of dedication to the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh. Patricia Verge also shares her life experience working to advance reconciliation, drawing on her vast expertise as an author who has chronicled pivotal aspects of the history of Indigenous Bahá'ís. Chelsea Horton draws on her doctoral work on the history of interaction between Indigenous peoples in North America and the Bahá'í Community as derived from personal interviews with Indigenous Bahá'ís. Horton's article provides a historical perspective on the challenges faced by Bahá'ís in actualizing the principle of unity in diversity—lessons that can be helpful as the Bahá'í process of fashioning unity at the local level proceeds under the guidance of the Five Year Plan of the Universal House of Justice.

While each article stands alone as a distinct contribution by its author, taken together they raise interconnected themes and questions. As such, the reader is strongly encouraged to read all the articles, preferably in the order in which they are published. By approaching the subject matter this way, it is hoped that this special issue will offer perspectives that can assist ongoing efforts at the community level to advance critical work such as learning through the institute process, inform teaching work, and help generate ideas

about how the history of the North American Bahá'í communities might inform current social discourses such as that of reconciliation.

Our attention to the experiences of Indigenous Bahá'ís does not end with this issue of the *Journal*: consideration is being given as to how to support further contributions that are specifically aimed at informing and influencing local and global public discourses regarding Indigenous peoples. Articles are already in the works that will share more on the experience of Indigenous Bahá'ís in Canada. As always, we value your comments and suggestions, and we welcome submissions for possible publication.

#### WORKS CITED

- Shoghi Effendi. *The Advent of Divine Justice*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971. Print.
- . *Citadel of Faith: Messages to America 1947-1957*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980. Print.
- . Letter dated 19 July 1956. In *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*. Ed. Helen Hornby. New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1994. Print.
- The Universal House of Justice. Letter dated 19 May 1994 to a National Spiritual Assembly.

# Walking the Spiritual Path with Both Feet Planted Firmly on the Ground

JOYCE BALDWIN

## *Abstract*

Since 1956 Joyce has been searching for the answer to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s prophetic exhortation to “[a]ttach great importance to the indigenous population of America” because “should they be educated and guided, there can be no doubt that they will become so illumined as to enlighten the whole world” (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel* 16). With each attempt to discover her true identity, Joyce is led closer to the answer of her lifelong search to find the way to that illumined world. In pursuit of this goal, Joyce has educated herself about the culture and stories of her clan and tribe to discover those beliefs that will act as a bridge of understanding between herself and her family and tribal members. Grandmothers, great aunts, and all their friends have enriched Joyce’s learning with many gems of understanding and have brought her ever closer to finding the answers she seeks.

## *Resumé*

Depuis 1956, Joyce cherche la réponse à l’exhortation prophétique de ‘Abdu’l-Bahá : « Vous devez attacher une grande importance aux Indiens, premiers habitants de l’Amérique » car « si ces Indiens sont éduqués et guidés comme

il convient, il ne fait aucun doute qu’ils deviendront si illuminés que la terre entière sera illuminée. » (cité dans *Citadel* 16). À mesure qu’elle s’est efforcée de découvrir sa véritable identité, Joyce s’est approchée davantage de l’objet de sa quête existentielle pour découvrir la voie vers ce monde illuminé. Pour ce faire, Joyce s’est renseignée sur la culture et les histoires de son clan et de sa tribu afin de cerner les croyances qui permettront de jeter un pont de compréhension entre elle-même et sa famille ainsi que les membres de sa tribu. Ses grand-mères, arrière-tantes et tous leurs amis ont enrichi le processus d’apprentissage de Joyce en lui transmettant de nombreuses perles de compréhension, qui l’ont rapprochée de plus en plus des réponses qu’elle cherche.

## *Resumen*

Desde 1956, Joyce ha estado buscando la respuesta a la exhortación profética de ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sobre “dar gran importancia a la enseñanza de los indígenas...de América” porque “si estos aborígenes fuesen educados y obtuviesen guía, llegarán a ser tan iluminados que a su vez podrán derramar luz sobre las regiones” (citado en *Citadel* 16). Con cada intento por descubrir su verdadera identidad, Joyce es dirigida más cerca a la respuesta de su búsqueda de toda la vida por encontrar una vía a ese mundo iluminado. En búsqueda de esta meta, Joyce se ha educado acerca de la cultura e historias de su clan y tribu para descubrir esas creencias que fungirán como un puente de conocimiento entre ella y su familia y los miembros de su tribu. Abuelas, tataras tías y todas sus amistades han enriquecido el aprendizaje de Joyce con muchas gemas de conocimiento y la han llevado cada vez más cerca a encontrar las respuestas que busca.

My story begins in May 1956 when I signed a Bahá'í "declaration card" and met with the Local Spiritual Assembly so they could determine if I really understood what I was doing. I was almost eighteen years old. The Assembly decided I knew what I was doing and sent my card to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States. Granted, I was a newbie in the Faith and could not possibly know the full implications of my decision to declare my acceptance of the Voice of God for this day, Bahá'u'lláh. What I *did* know was that for the first time in my life, faith and religion finally made sense, a sense that included all the people of the world and that explained why there were so many churches and why they seemed to be at odds with one another. I was grateful that my prayers to find God were heard and answered. A few years earlier, at age thirteen, I had quit the church I was attending because of the bigotry I experienced there, and I prayed that God would show me where to find Him. I told Him I did believe He was there but, please, show me where to find Him and how to follow Him. It took five years for that to happen.

A few weeks before I enrolled, Joyce Anderson Combs—my friend since elementary school—had signed her declaration card. She was the first Tlingit Indian to enroll in the Faith in Alaska (*High Endeavors* 77–78). The Local Assembly received this letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi praising it for its success in enrolling two Indian believers:

The news you conveyed of the enrollment of Miss Campbell was most welcome. The Guardian is very proud to have these Indian Bahá'ís in the Faith, and hopes that they will make every effort to carry the Message of Bahá'u'lláh to their people, remembering always the promises of the beloved Master of how great the Indians would become when the illumination of this Revelation reached them. (*High Endeavors* 27)

And so, my new life began.

Born in 1938 in Metlakatla on Annette Island, the only Indian reserve in Alaska, I was my parents' second child. Both of my parents had full-blooded Tsimshian mothers and both had European fathers—when you do the math, that makes me half-Tsimshian, too. Metlakatla was dubbed "the most non-Indian all-Indian village" in Alaska. The village was split between two competing denominations, neither of which would tolerate "Indianness." By that, I mean that there was no effort to teach children Shimalgyk, the language of the Tsimshians—no traditional dances, regalia, songs, or observances. Indianness was frowned upon by the churches and by their members. During the two generations prior to mine, speaking Shimalgyk was forbidden.

My family lived in Metlakatla until 1941, when we moved to Ketchikan. At that time, Ketchikan was a fish-cannery town that also had lumber-producing mills. It was a town divided

between the newcomers and the local Indians. On one side of the creek was "Indian Town" (where we lived), and on the other side was "Newtown," where the white people lived. Indian women were employed in the fish canneries, while Indian men caught and sold fish to the canneries. There were upwards of a dozen fish canneries operating in Ketchikan, which became known as the "fish capital of the world."

My mother grew up in Ketchikan and was one of the first Indians to attend public school following a suit brought by a family against the school board for barring three Indian girls from attending. Segregation was no longer legal; however, hidden prejudices surfaced in subtle attempts to keep Indians out of public school. The case was won by the only Indian lawyer in Alaska, and of the three girls, my mother was the only one who chose to go to public school. She told me it was because she wanted to have a good education and knew that would not happen in the Indian school.

My father and paternal grandmother also moved to Ketchikan from Metlakatla. He graduated from high school, but, as was the case for all Indian men, the only work available for him was fishing and logging, both high-risk jobs. In 1949, when I was ten years old, my father was lost at sea while towing logs.

My gratitude is endless for all that my mother endured for us children. She kept all five of us together after my father's death in that awful winter

of 1949. Her uncle, the mayor of Metlakatla, offered to take two of us girls to raise as his own, even though he and his wife were already raising thirteen children. Mom thanked him but declined and said that her family would stay together. I often thanked my mother for not giving me away when she had the chance. That would always bring a smile to her face.

Not too much changed in Ketchikan when the first Bahá'í pioneers arrived. There were still "Indian Town" and "Newtown." The law forbade segregation, but the prejudices that gave rise to it were still underlying all aspects of life.

The Ketchikan Local Assembly is to be praised for its efforts to follow the instructions of Shoghi Effendi. Study classes were immediately set up for me to learn about the Covenant and the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh. I believe those classes set my feet firmly on the path of learning that has kept me in the Faith for all these years. Also, praise goes out to those wonderful pioneers who left their homes to move to Alaska. Their obedience and love for this new Faith continue to inspire me.

I was a Bahá'í when I graduated from the same high school my father had attended. It was very thrilling to me when most of the Assembly members came to my graduation. Looking out at the audience and seeing so many of the Bahá'ís gave me a wonderful feeling of being accepted and supported.

The Bahá'ís brought to my attention 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement on the

high calling that the Indians of the Americas had been given; namely, that when educated and given the divine teachings, they would “become so illumined as to enlighten the whole world” (*Citadel* 16). I had no clue how that was to come about—I was only eighteen, and no one I knew had gone to college. Somehow, I knew I had to obtain an education even though I did not know how that would come about. It was a mystery to me how people got money to go to school in a far-off city. And, as for being spiritual, in reality I had considered myself a Christian “drop-out” since the age of thirteen.

My mother accepted the news that I wanted to become a Bahá'í and did not speak against it. Instead, she told my older sister to go with me to the firesides<sup>1</sup> and find out exactly what I had gotten myself into. Mom was the one who taught me that religions were like spokes in a wheel—they all lead to the same thing. By the following year, my sister had also enrolled. To be very sure that we were safe, my mother held meetings at her home with a couple of the seasoned pioneers, and soon after she signed her declaration card, as well. She remained a Bahá'í until she died in 2010.

A big influence in my life was my paternal, full-blooded Tsimshian grandmother. Before enrolling, I

mailed to her a Bahá'í pamphlet that listed some of the fundamental teachings of the Faith. She sent it back to me with a handwritten note at the bottom that said, “These are good Christian teachings—follow them.” I believe she recognized the voice of God in those teachings. She constantly reminded me how lucky we were to be born Indian. She died in Seattle in 1956, shortly after my enrollment in the Faith. Years later, my husband and I looked for her gravesite in a Seattle cemetery to offer prayers for her and found that she had been buried at the edge of the Japanese section of the cemetery—which is separate from the whites-only sections—because there was no Indian section.

By July of my first year as a Bahá'í, I had become engaged to Jay “Leo” Baldwin, one of the Bahá'í pioneers who had come to Ketchikan in February 1956. He was twenty-two, and I was eighteen. We married in October that same year. Leo had enrolled in the Faith in Corpus Christi, Texas, and shortly afterward, he attended the National Bahá'í Convention in Wilmette, Illinois, where he heard the call for pioneers and made his decision to go to Alaska. I asked him why he chose Alaska, and he said it was because of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s instructions to go where you can speak the language of the people. In Alaska, English was the accepted language.

He has always been my support, encouraging me to continue with my education because of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement about the importance of

---

1 The Bahá'í name for informal gatherings often held in the homes of individual believers to share the teachings of the Faith to friends and acquaintances who have shown an interest in the subject.

teaching the Indians. It took several years and many moves from my little fishing town, but I finally became the first female in my family to receive a college degree. However, I still grappled with the question of how the Indians would fulfill their destiny as foretold by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Another Tlingit girl, Martha, enrolled in the Faith. Her fiancée also enrolled; then my sister, Roberta, along with her new husband; after that, my mother. The following spring, two more married Native couples enrolled. Eventually, a rumor started circulating in Ketchikan that in order to become a Bahá'í you had to marry an Indian! That one always brought chuckles from the Native Bahá'í sisters.

When we were in the middle of the Ten Year World Crusade that our beloved Shoghi Effendi had initiated, several of the young Bahá'ís consulted and decided that we needed to deepen our understanding of the Administrative Order,<sup>2</sup> so we set up weekly classes to read and study together. Most of those who studied together remained in the community, working for the advancement of the Faith. Many have gone into the next realm, where I imagine they are still hard at work serving the Cause.

A few Native Bahá'ís slowly drifted away; I have remained close in friendship to a few of them. No indication of blame, or finger-pointing; just a quiet

fading out from community life. Most are living lives of quiet service to others, to their families, and to their Native communities. Some indicate they still love Bahá'u'lláh and want to show that love by giving service to others. For those who remained, those formative years were fundamental in learning to rely on the Administrative Order. Just discovering how to use the gift of this system devised by Bahá'u'lláh was a huge undertaking. In addition to learning the art of consultation, we were constantly encouraged to teach, teach, and teach some more!

Many Natives joined the Faith and were actively trying to promote teaching the Faith in Native communities. We did not know exactly how to do this and tried many approaches. Shoghi Effendi encouraged us to have all-Native conferences where we could consult among ourselves, but some of the non-Native Bahá'ís saw this as divisive and expressed resentment at being excluded, possibly because they felt that they were the real Bahá'ís and we, the Natives, were still learning; possibly because they were measuring success by material wealth and not by character; or possibly because they were of the culture that produced the missionary attitude of "I know more." It took time for some members of the Bahá'í community to understand the difference between unity and uniformity. I felt that some of them still were locked into the idea of "assimilation," a European concept that had been pursued for hundreds of years since outsiders first made contact with

---

2 A Bahá'í term indicating the system of institutions that administers the affairs of the Bahá'í community.



our shores. Only our commitment to the Faith will overcome differences in outlook.

A committee was formed to address the task of "Indian teaching." The chairwoman came from the lower forty-eight states and had no experience with Alaskan village life. She would choose only the well-dressed, well-groomed, articulate teachers to travel to remote villages, preferring them over the Indians who volunteered to go but were not materially well-off.

Shoghi Effendi, so loved by the Native Bahá'ís, left us in 1957. In 1963 the Ten Year Crusade had been completed, and we all breathed a sigh of relief when the Universal House of Justice was elected. A new spirit invigorated us all, and a renewed teaching effort was launched in Alaska. Teaching teams of Bahá'í youth were recruited from the western states. Mass teaching began in Alaska in the late 1960s and continued each summer through 1976. Youth enlisted in the "Army of Light" and came to Alaska one hundred strong. They traveled and taught in many of the Native villages, and they were able to enroll many Native believers throughout Alaska. I was hopeful that now I would see the path for the illumination of the world.

More learning had to be undertaken. We read that teaching and consolidation had to go hand in hand. We tried many forms of consolidation, but the numbers that had been won in the initial teaching programs were quickly being lost. The teaching committees that were organized to follow up

in the villages were being dominated by those new to village life. They sent teachers to the villages who were chosen according to how successful they were by their own culture's criteria rather than how well they understood the village culture. In one village, thirty souls had accepted the Faith; today, only an isolated handful remains. Hours of consultation were held on how to consolidate the villages. More learning and more growing were required to move forward.

My first gleaning came in 1959 when Leo and I and our two babies moved to Corpus Christi, Texas, to help run a moving company that belonged to Leo's mother, who was ill. I saw firsthand the gross materialism that infected the lower forty-eight states. Alaska, being so isolated from the continental United States, was spared much of the consumerism that is part of everyday life in the other states.

In 1956, Leo received a letter from Shoghi Effendi addressed to all pioneers, requesting them to remain at their posts at all costs. Around that same time the government notified Leo that he had been drafted into the Army. We prayed about it and decided he would have to obey the draft notice. We wondered who would win—the government or Shoghi Effendi. No contest there: they deferred Leo after finding a heart murmur that would have been detrimental to him had he participated in basic training in Anchorage in November. He remained at his post until his mother's illness



brought us out of Alaska and into Texas.

After two years, my mother-in-law recovered from her illness and we set our sights on returning to Leo's pioneer post and my hometown. By then we had three young children, ages four, three, and one. We lived and worked in Ketchikan until 1969, when the call to pioneer came once again from our new Alaskan National Spiritual Assembly. The appeal was for a pioneer to move to Wrangell, Alaska. By then we had had a fourth child, a girl born in 1963, shortly before the election of the first Universal House of Justice. We consulted together with all the children about another move to a smaller city. Even though they were small, our children were very aware of our commitment to the Faith. They all agreed that we should move to Wrangell and help to establish the Faith in that small city. Notices were given to our employers, and in May, when school was out, we moved to Wrangell.

I wish to acknowledge how well our children responded to the move, and my sister deserves a word of praise for her devotion to keeping the classes running and the children richly rewarded with her endless supply of homemade cookies. All my children loved Auntie Bobbie and her gigantic cookie jar.

There was only one other Bahá'í family that lived outside of Wrangell. All four children in that family were close in age to our own children, so it was natural that the first activity set up was a weekly children's class at

their house down the road. Many life-long friendships were formed thanks to those children's classes.

To give you an idea of a children's class in Wrangell, just imagine children reciting prayers they had memorized, when one peeks around and exclaims, "Hey! What's that?" We all look out the window and watch a ginormous black bear walk by the house on all fours. As it passes the Volkswagen Beetle parked outside, its back can be seen clearly over the car! The lady of the house says quietly, "It's just a black bear on its way to the dump. The bears go up there every day to rummage through the garbage for food. Okay, who's next with their prayer?"

Lots of teaching was carried out by both adults and children. By the next Ridván, there were a few enrollments, two of which were from local Natives from Wrangell clans, and two more families, including Auntie Bobbie and her family had moved into our town, so the first Local Spiritual Assembly of Wrangell was formed. One of the Native believers was the local artist Harry Ukas. An estimated twenty percent of the population of Wrangell were from Native clans. The majority of these were Tlinget; others were either Haidan or Tsimshian.

By early 1975, the National Spiritual Assembly of Alaska had embarked on an ambitious program of teaching. An estimated one hundred young people joined the "Army of Light," as the team was called, and traveled throughout Alaska carrying the message of hope to all. Wrangell was ready to

receive a group of those young believers, and a campaign was launched with help from the children's classes, which had grown to nearly twenty children and four teachers. The children created lap books and put them together for the team to use when they went door to door inviting residents to an evening program of music and talk. The lap books were a collection of pages showing Bahá'í principles with relevant pictures cut from magazines. The children chose the pictures and glued them to the proper pages

Our Local Spiritual Assembly had raised fifteen thousand dollars in cash and in-kind donations for the teaching effort. A daily prayer campaign was launched before the teaching team arrived, and devotional meetings took place at different homes. Children attending Bahá'í classes, including children from families who were not enrolled in the Faith, requested in advance to host a devotional at their homes. For nineteen days, we prayed to ensure the success of the teaching efforts, and the Local Spiritual Assembly wrote a letter to invite our beloved Rúhíyyih *Khánúm*—the wife of Shoghi Effendi and a Hand of the Cause in her own right—to join us for a “Victory Celebration.” She visited Wrangell shortly after the end of the campaign and spent two glorious days with us, meeting with the Assembly members and visiting with the community for a Nineteen Day Feast that was attended by over seventy-five believers, including youth and children—most of them new.

Rúhíyyih *Khánúm* especially wanted to meet the Native believers. She encouraged us all to continue learning all we could about our beloved Faith and, in turn, to carry the message to our families. We all were greatly inspired by her talks.

We noticed then that many of the new community members had participated in our Bahá'í children's classes even though their parents were not Bahá'í. The wisdom of these classes was not realized for many years—not until our beloved Universal House of Justice created the “core activities,”<sup>3</sup> the first of which is the children's class. But at that point, we had a core of youth between the ages of fifteen and eighteen years old. The question was, “How do we consolidate them?”

In 1975 the Local Spiritual Assembly launched a project called “An Indian Summer”: youth were invited from the communities of Southeast Alaska to spend a few weeks in Wrangell—housed and fed by the Bahá'í families—to take part in a learning program that included visiting Native artists and Native leaders in order to learn more about the culture of the people that had lived in Southeast Alaska for thousands of years. The local Native Bahá'ís helped set up daily appointments for the youth to visit the families of artists and ask them questions, take notes, and learn. I accompanied

---

3 The “core activities” include children's classes, devotional gatherings, study circles, and junior youth animation groups.

the youth on these visits and discovered how little I knew of my own culture. It was like coming home.

This experience helped me to partially answer the question of how 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prophecy would be fulfilled. Bahá'u'lláh's injunction to "know [our] own self" (*Tablets* 24) was ever present on my mind. I was still ignorant of the history of my family, my clan, my tribe. No one in my family seemed to want to talk about it. At this point, my interest in learning about my ancestors and their way of life began to grow within me. The youth were wonderful, attentive, and genuinely interested in what they were learning. Most of those Native youth remained faithful to the teachings of the Faith. That was enough to kindle my own interest.

Our children were close to graduating from high school when conditions over which we had no control caused the economy of Wrangell to come to a screeching halt. Every effort was made to keep our business alive, but to no avail. The entire Southeast Alaska wood industry had been brought to a standstill. Logging camps closed. Lumber mills shut down. Pulp mills failed. With prayers and consultation we made the decision to move to California to find work and to be able to put our children in college.

I view that move as very instrumental in furthering my own education about Native American history and spirituality. In California, both Leo and I found work that served the interests of the Native tribes of the area. I

worked for the Local Indians for Education (LIFE) chapter in Central Valley, first as the secretary/bookkeeper and then as the acting director. Leo found work as the director of United Native Indian Tribes of Central Valley. A whole new set of learnings was in store for us.

We slowly began our education in the history that was never taught to us in public schools. I had grown up with only a bit of knowledge about the three tribes in Southeast Alaska and the Aleuts and Inuit from the North. Ketchikan had become home to a large number of Aleuts who had been forced to leave their island homes because of the threat of invasion by Japan during World War I.

Two employees of the LIFE chapter, a Pit River Indian lady and myself, were chosen to take a course in Federal Indian Law that was being taught at D-Q University near Davis, California, by Dennis Banks, an American Indian Movement leader. D-Q University was among the first six tribal colleges and universities in the United States, and the first in California. The course opened my eyes to the many actions undertaken by the American government to assimilate Indian people. My education in Indian affairs continues to this day. Why is this important to me? Because it has set me more firmly on the road to discovering why the Indian is so determined to remain "Indian" and avoid assimilation, as well as how that fits in with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prophecy.

The new civilized world of the United States represents division,

multiple denominations, competition, power-seeking over others and the environment, and the race to accumulate wealth at all costs. The Indian vision of the world is one of working together to care for families, clans, and villages—and to do so without harm to the environment. The Indian learned how to live together with the animals, taking only what was needed for food. He knew from observing his surroundings how the world operated and did not try to conquer nature. He understood that there is a balance between the physical and the spiritual worlds and did his best to maintain it.

My oldest daughter, Roxanna, graduated high school and started college in Shasta County, California. She and her husband, Allen Jensen, were determined to get their education, and Leo and I were equally determined to help them obtain it. When they subsequently decided that they wanted to attend the University of Washington in Seattle, we felt that it was our responsibility to assist them. So, we preceded them by moving to a small community near Seattle, and I went to work for the Muckleshoot Tribe as executive secretary. A new adventure was at hand.

The tribe's executive director had arranged for a satellite program of classes from Antioch University to be held on the reservation, and he asked me if I was interested in obtaining a college degree. He felt that if I—a Native woman from another tribe—enrolled and was successful, others from the Muckleshoot Tribe would be

encouraged to enroll also. Up to that point, I had taken night classes wherever I lived and had stacked up close to seventy college credits. I jumped at the chance, particularly because the director said that if I did enroll, my primary obligation would be to my studies and then, if I had time, I could do some work for him. By 1980 I had completed my courses and earned enough credits to graduate with a bachelor's degree in Business Administration. How marvelous is the fate in store for those who strive.

Roxanna and Allen, however, changed their minds and decided to remain in California and attend Humboldt State University in Arcata, as it was much smaller than the University of Washington. Leo and I agreed it was a good choice. By then, my daughter was carrying her first child, but she was determined to complete her education. Leo and I decided to move to Arcata before they got there to ensure that she would have a support system available to her when she had her baby. Both my daughter and her husband are Bahá'ís, and his family was also very involved in pioneering and teaching in Africa and California.

We lived in Arcata from 1980 to 1996. Roxanna and Allen graduated from Humboldt State University in 1984. In 1986, Leo and our youngest daughter, Angela Higley, graduated on the same day from Humboldt State University. Directly after graduating, Angela went to work as an accountant in the finance department of the Hoopa Tribe in Northern California,

where she advanced to the position of chief financial officer. She is currently the CEO of the Cher-Ae Heights Indian Community of the Trinidad Rancheria, where she and her husband can be close to their daughter and their three grandbabies. Family is so important to Native people. We want our children involved in the life of the community, and we take them with us to all the meetings.

Our stay in Arcata brought with it many opportunities to become involved in Native teaching. Both my husband and I served on the Local Spiritual Assembly of Arcata. Our community hosted several Native traveling teachers and performers such as Kevin Locke, Dallas Chief Eagle, and Mitchell Silas, a Navajo sand painter. I puzzled over the community's seeming lack of enthusiasm for Indian teaching. Most members did not attend these activities or help organize them. In fact, many did not know any Natives, even though we were only seventy miles from the largest land-based reservation in California. The majority had never visited the reserve and were fearful of going there. I was told to be very careful as "everyone there carries rifles and you could be shot."

It was at this time of Native teaching that Leo and I were harshly criticized by some members of the Local Spiritual Assembly. They said that we were not teaching correctly and that we were sidestepping the Assembly's decisions in order to carry on our own way of teaching. Sanctions were put

on us that forbade us from teaching. Our wise National Spiritual Assembly responded by saying that everyone has the obligation to teach. The Local Spiritual Assembly then forbade us from being "public" teachers of the Faith. Rather than be a source of disunity to our community, we withdrew from all activities and carried on teaching in our home. We became very involved in peace activities and in a twelve-step group called Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA). It was at this time that another lady in ACOA and I showed the video *The Honour of All*<sup>4</sup> to the Drug and Alcohol Task Force of the Hoopa Tribe. The task force was so taken with the success of the program to curb alcoholism shown in the movie that it called for a tribal gathering to watch it. Much good came from that learning by the Hoopa Tribe.

Some white Americans are afraid of Native people. And of African-Americans. And now, increasingly, of Muslim people. Some of these same prejudices manifest themselves even within our own Bahá'í communities one result of which is that once again many Native Bahá'ís are returning to their Native communities and learning more about the history and culture of

---

4 Produced by Native Bahá'í Phil Lucas, this 1987 docu-drama portrays the true story of the ultimately successful effort by the Alkali Lake Indian Band (British Columbia) to overcome alcoholism in their community. The film won the prestigious International Public Television (INPUT) Award.

their own people. A positive outcome of this reaction is a greater acceptance of the responsibility to teach our own people rather than relying on those outside the community to take on this responsibility.

Another outcome for me is that the more I learn, the more I believe in the spiritual nature of Native Bahá'ís. Perhaps the teaching that the tree that is pruned the most bears the most fruit<sup>5</sup> can be applied to the history of America's policy of genocide against the Indian people of this continent. Simply put, I believe the Hand of God alone has kept the remaining Native people alive in this country and the trials they have endured have made them particularly receptive to the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

The experience in Arcata, California, is a good example of what I mean. This was a community where we learned by process of trial and error. As is widely known, Native peoples are highly susceptible to the disease of alcoholism. Consequently, we became involved with helping to set up a Bahá'ís in Recovery Program (BIRP) in a nearby city where a few Native and non-Native Bahá'ís wanted to start a program of healing. The Local Spiritual Assembly in that city heard the request to approve the group being started within their civil boundaries, and while it approved of BIRP, it decided that since some non-Bahá'ís would be attending, no Bahá'í prayers should be used.

How strange that was to me at the time. Indeed, it took a long time and a great deal of thought and observation to come to the conclusion that much spiritual growth was still necessary for many of the current non-Native Bahá'ís as well as the Native ones. I also found that unless there is a Native person humbly requesting a specifically Native activity, little teaching would be directed toward the Native Americans in California. As I realized this, I came to appreciate how great it is that Bahá'ís throughout the world are encouraged to use individual initiative! When many of my Bahá'í friends would declare, "I don't know any Indians." I would say, "You know me." Too often I would get the response, "I don't think of you as an Indian. You're a Bahá'í!" But being a Bahá'í does not mean I don't need to express my cultural perspective and share my desire to reach out to other Native Americans.

Soon after, I decided to retire from the best job I ever had and move north. Leo and I moved to the Quinault Reservation in Washington, where our oldest daughter and her family were living and working. She was the special education teacher for the reservation school system, and her husband was the fish hatchery manager. Leo and I both went to work for a beautiful lodge on Lake Quinault, but Native teaching was always on our minds. There were no administrative institutions to consult with, so we operated as isolated believers on the basis of individual initiative.

---

<sup>5</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 51.



Sessions for breakfast and study were set up at our home on the lake every Sunday morning. One of the books we carefully studied was *Century of Light*. We are still close with that small but faithful group of friends who gathered to strive to understand this great Faith. *Century of Light* made a great impact on me, and I sent it to my brother, Brent, who was also a Bahá'í and who was then enduring a great test. He later told me that Bahá'u'lláh was the only constant in his life. That made me even more grateful for the pioneers who brought this Faith to Alaska.

We were happy there on Lake Quinault. It is located in a rainforest and is surrounded by great evergreen trees and mountains, and it offered us a fabulous lake at our doorstep. Elk herds often passed by our little house—fences could not keep them out. So it was with regret that we accepted our destiny to move from that lovely sanctuary and return to another large community in Washington. The decision came after torrential rains combined with melting snow on the mountains caused the lake to flood and overrun houses and roads. It was time to move.

This time we settled in a very loving community in Tumwater, Washington. The members welcomed us with open arms and treated us like family. Was I home? That's what it felt like. This community was very familiar with Native life and reservations, as Washington has twenty-nine federally recognized tribes in addition to a large

number of tribes that are not yet recognized by the federal government.

My husband found a job in maintenance at a large hotel in Tumwater, and I was hired as a claims manager for the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries. We bought a mobile home in a senior park, and our new life began. Life was good there. We jumped into all the activities in our small but loving community, working and getting to know our neighbors and creating opportunities to teach the Faith.

Our oldest daughter and her family were reassigned from the Quinault Reservation to the Makah Reservation on the northern tip of the Olympic Peninsula. They were instrumental in reinstating the Bahá'í Council Fire on the Makah Reservation in Neah Bay, Washington. The Bahá'í Council Fire was an annual three-day campout on the beach, and it provided many opportunities for teaching. We made numerous visits there and became acquainted with many of the Native Bahá'ís. We looked forward to the Bahá'í Council Fire all year, and we promoted it heavily among the friends in nearby communities. As the years progressed, more and more Native believers were invited to speak of the Faith within the great circle of friends that were in attendance. Some years there were only three hundred people; other years there were upwards of five hundred souls gathered to enjoy each other's company by singing around the campfire, telling stories, and hearing about the wonderful victories of the Faith



in other lands. Young and old alike created many wonderful memories in that place. We were actively practicing the oneness and beauty of all mankind during the days of the Neah Bay Council Fire.

It was at this time that I felt the compulsion to create my own regalia, a button robe that would depict my clan—the Gisbutwada or Killer Whale clan—and tribal life. There was no one there to teach me, so I did the next best thing: I found a book in the library that showed me how to make my own robe. Little did I know that soon I would have the chance to wear and dance in my newly created leaping killer whale robe. Considering that I was making a robe for the first time—and without a skilled clan member to teach me—it turned out pretty good.

New advancements for the Faith were underway. Study circles were found to be a real community booster. There was occasional talk of something called “Ruhi.” No one seemed to know exactly what that was. From the Universal House of Justice, to the National Spiritual Assemblies, and then to the newly formed Regional Bahá'í Councils<sup>6</sup> came the call to immerse ourselves in the Ruhi Institute process. We didn't know what that was, but many arose to learn and attempt to meet the challenge. We set

up intensive study circles at Brighton Creek, a facility near Thurston and Pierce Counties in Washington.

A new compulsion to absorb the Ruhi process overcame me, and I spent many three-day weekends at Brighton Creek, a Bahá'í retreat where the Institute Board had arranged for intensive learning to occur. Around that time a call came from the Institute Board<sup>7</sup> for an all-Indian, intensive version of the Ruhi Institute course with as many Indian tutors as could be found. With great joy I found myself in the most spiritual atmosphere, surrounded by so many of what truly felt like members of my own family, searching out the hidden meanings in the soul-stretching words of our Faith. At that time many reached a new level of commitment to serve the Faith. Finally, the day came when I finished Book 7, the tutor training book, and was able to start facilitating study circles in my own community and cluster. I began my tutor development program, several study circles were set up, and the institute process advanced in Thurston County.

Five years had passed since we had moved into the Tumwater community.

7 The board responsible for Bahá'í training institutes. The concept of training institutes was introduced by the Universal House of Justice in the mid-1990s. Its purpose is to assist individuals in deepening their understanding of the Bahá'í teachings and to help them gain the spiritual insights and the practical skills they need to carry out the work of the community.

---

6 An element of Bahá'í administration, between the local and national levels, instituted by the Universal House of Justice (Letter to All National Spiritual Assemblies, 30 May 1997).

All my children were grown, serving humanity in their chosen fields. Life was good. Learning was now a way of life. More Natives were joining the Faith. I found a beautiful teaching from Bahá'u'lláh: "Should anyone give you a choice between the opportunity to render a service to Me and a service to [your parents], choose ye to serve them, and let such service be a path leading you to Me" (from a Tablet translated from the Arabic, quoted in *Compilations* 387). It was at that time that my dear mother announced her great desire to return to Ketchikan located on the island where she was born. All of her family was gone from that area, however, and we were concerned about her going back by herself. Since I was now at the age that I could retire and draw a pension, my husband and I consulted, prayed, and decided to go with my mother back to Alaska. Ketchikan was also Leo's original pioneering post, and he felt a need to return and continue serving the Faith there.

There is no such thing as sacrifice. Even when we think we are giving up something, there is something more valuable in store for us. When we left Ketchikan in 1969, it was still a segregated town. Natives were never hired to work in public positions. Jobs for Natives were still in fishing, cannery work, or trades of some kind. Indian Town was still Indian Town. Now, fast-forward thirty-five years to 2004, I could hardly believe my eyes. Native art was visible all over the downtown area. New totem poles had been placed

in strategic positions throughout the town. Ketchikan Indian Community, now a federally recognized tribe, had a new administrative building smack-dab in the middle of Newtown that included a health clinic and a mental health clinic. In the banks, half of the tellers were young Native girls. Cruise ships made regular four- to six-hour layovers in Ketchikan so that visitors could tour the island to see the Native carving houses, where master carvers instructed young Native apprentices in the beautiful art of the Pacific Coast. Our Indianness was no longer hidden, but proudly displayed.

I was able to attend an intensive course in my own tribal language. There I met other older women of my tribe who invited me to join their dance group. The button robe I had been compelled to create could now be used when I danced with the Tsimshian Dance Group at public ceremonies, totem pole raisings, services honoring clan chiefs, and even memorials for those Native leaders that had passed on into the next world.

None of this was present when I grew up there except for those dances that were performed in secret places. As a young child, on very rare occasions, my grandmother took my sister and I in a truck full of other people at night to a place out of town. We would enter a large building that had black blankets covering the windows and doors, and then we were led to a place where we sat with many others, waiting in the dark. At a signal, a drum would loudly announce the start

of the ceremony and dancers in regalia leapt onto a floor lit with firelight.

I am so grateful for the time I was given to learn some of my language and culture and to join my clan sisters in singing and dancing the stories of our ancestors. During those times that I would sing in the language of my ancestors, my grandmother would be right there by my side. Thank you, Grandma. Your encouragement helped me find the Faith that has guided my life!

Those were very happy years. We served on the Local Spiritual Assembly. I tutored many study circles. For three summers I worked as a guide for the million or so tourists who visited our island, and in the winters, I worked part time as a substitute elementary teacher. The degree I earned at the Muckleshoot Reservation came in handy: I did not have a teaching certificate, but in our school system one can be a substitute teacher if one has a bachelor's degree. We spent seven years in Ketchikan getting to know my mom, my clan, and the way of life of the Natives of this land. A new learning began to take shape.

Shoghi Effendi asked the Native believers to teach their own people. We had to learn how to do that. We had to grow into the commitment to do that. We had to grow in our love for Bahá'u'lláh so that our teaching became the delight of our hearts. We had to get into that community to reach and teach those around us. Now I know there is no sacrifice. I get more from being my own true self. There is always more to know and discover.

After Mom's passing (the locals in Ketchikan refer to it as having taken "a walk in the woods"), on a day when Leo, at age seventy-five, was up on the roof of the house shoveling snow, we decided to move south where there was less snow. Alaska is a place for young men to become accustomed to hardship, to learn who they are. It was time for us to go south with the birds.

We recently returned to Tumwater. We bought a larger home in that same senior park we left behind when we took Mom back to Ketchikan and are currently enjoying the many opportunities to know and love the people that live here. God is good.

#### WORKS CITED

- Abdu'l-Bahá. *Tablets of the Divine Plan*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1977. Print.
- . *Paris Talks*. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1972. Print.
- Bahá'u'lláh. *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988. Print.
- Compilation of Compilations*. Vol. 1. Mona Vale: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991. Print.
- Shoghi Effendi. *Citadel of Faith: Messages to America 1947-1957*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980. Print.
- . *High Endeavours: Messages to Alaska*. National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Alaska, Inc., 1973. Print.
- The Universal House of Justice. Letter to All National Spiritual Assemblies. 30 May 1997.

# A Personal Journey toward Reconciliation

PATRICIA VERGE

## *Abstract*

In describing a personal journey of engagement with Indigenous peoples, the author emphasizes the importance of learning, listening, and personal transformation, as well as the potentialities of the Bahá'í community's current series of global plans. These plans seek to build capacity in every human group to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization. The methods and approaches of the plans also have potential to "disable every instrument devised by humanity over the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another" (The Universal House of Justice, 28 December 2010).

## *Resumé*

Dans son article, l'auteur relate un cheminement personnel d'interactions avec les peuples autochtones, soulignant l'importance de l'écoute, de l'apprentissage et de la transformation personnelle, ainsi que le potentiel que présente la série actuelle des plans mondiaux de la communauté bahá'íe. Ces plans cherchent à renforcer les capacités de tous les groupes humains à se lever et à contribuer à l'avancement de la civilisation. Ces plans exposent des méthodes et des approches qui peuvent désactiver « tous les instruments conçus par l'humanité durant la longue période de son enfance pour qu'un groupe en opprime un autre ». (Message du 28 décembre 2010 de la Maison universelle de justice)

## *Resumen*

Al describir un trayecto personal de acción con gente indígena, el autor enfatiza la importancia del aprendizaje, el escuchar, y la transformación personal, además de las potencialidades de la serie de planes globales actuales de la comunidad bahá'í. Estos planes buscan crear capacidad en cada grupo humano para que se levante y contribuya al avance de la civilización. Los métodos y enfoques de los planes también tienen el potencial de "inhabilitar cada instrumento ideado por la humanidad a través del periodo largo de su niñez para que un grupo oprima a otro" (La Casa Universal de Justicia, Mensaje del 28 de diciembre de 2010).

I begin this article with a broken heart after finding out several days ago about the death of a young man, Wilfred Amos Jr., from the Stoney Nakoda First Nation at Morley, near Banff, Alberta, in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains. The youngest child of a large family, he was the same age as many of his nephews and nieces, who often called him "Uncle Babe."

His family traces its lineage to Chief Jacob Bearspaw, one of the signatories to Treaty 7. The Stoney Nakoda First Nation is made up of three bands (Bearspaw, Chiniquay, and Wesley), each of which has its own chief and councilors. In 1877, at Blackfoot Crossing, east of Calgary, Alberta, the three Nakoda chiefs were numbered among the First Nations signatories of Treaty 7, along with representatives of Queen Victoria.

When a group of Bahá'í friends from off-reserve first met Wilfred's family, his mother Caroline told us, "You know, we're really good people. We never drink, and we always teach our children to pray." This touched my heart very much. Wilfred attended our Bahá'í children's classes and several of our children and youth summer camps at Sylvan Lake Bahá'í Centre in Central Alberta. We had annual picnics with his family and other friends. Wilfred and several cousins, nieces, and nephews were close friends. They loved to lip-sync and play musical instruments in a small old house they called "Amos Hall." When Bahá'í Shabnam Tashakour and her husband, Travis Birch, lived in Calgary, where Travis was a dancer with the Alberta Ballet, he taught the youth some step dance moves. Once he took them to the Alberta Ballet practice studio so they could dance in front of a full-length mirror. A few off-reserve Bahá'ís attended their performances in Amos Hall.

The Amos family made a big effort to support the youth, and they tried to ward off pressures to consume alcohol and drugs from others on the reserve. One night, people from the reserve torched Amos Hall. Undeterred, the youth bought new equipment and began to use another old house, but again, some people stole the new equipment. We studied part of *Ruhi Book One*<sup>1</sup> in that house with four

youth from the reserve, including Wilfred, and a couple of youth and several adults living off-reserve. Over the years, a few Bahá'ís from communities surrounding the Stoney Nakoda First Nation have participated in activities with the Bahá'ís on the reserve.

When the youth of this family reached their mid-teen years, things went a little crazy and they succumbed to peer pressure, getting into drugs and alcohol despite the positive example set by the family, who made constant efforts to help them get back on the straight and narrow. Most of the youth did, but Wilfred couldn't escape the grips of addiction. In the end, after some years of alcohol abuse, he was a victim of manslaughter.

At the time of his death, he was still deeply grieving the early death of an older brother, as well as the passing of his own mother and father, all within the space of three years. Wilfred was the father of two young children, with whose mother he had an unhealthy on-again, off-again relationship. He made efforts to seek counseling, though he never got into treatment. He tried to stay sober for his children during their last Christmas together. During his last summer, he stayed for a time on the Big Horn Reserve with his sister and family. He went hunting and even shot an elk. After they dried the meat, the family was able to sell it to obtain badly needed money for groceries.

I give all these details about Wilfred because this is what is in my heart

---

<sup>1</sup> Titled *Reflections on the Life of the Spirit*, it is the first book in an educational program

---

developed by the Ruhi Institute.

at this time. Though we hear so many stories about the deplorable conditions in Indigenous communities, Wilfred was not a statistic. He was a kind and gentle young man. He spoke his language fluently. His death cut short a life that should have been full of promise—the kind of life every youth in our land should have. As the deterioration of society proceeds rapidly at the family, community, and institutional levels, as Shoghi Effendi said it would<sup>2</sup>, Canada's Indigenous communities suffer disproportionately from conditions of injustice and oppression. The harsh reality of life on most reserves or poor neighborhoods where many First Nations people live today is a far cry from the lives of most average Canadian Bahá'ís, myself included.

Four years ago, after over thirty years serving among Indigenous people, I felt I had to know more about the reasons for these conditions. I carefully read many books, including the reports of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP), released in 1996, and the reports of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC), released in 2015.<sup>3</sup> Some days

my chin was on the floor! The truth of Canada's colonial history is devastating. The fact that Indigenous people have survived the onslaughts of broken treaties, near starvation, residential schools, isolation, and attempts at assimilation is a remarkable testament to their courage, strength, determination, and strong community bonds.

A forthcoming memoir of my spiritual journey and how it has been entwined with First Nations people attempts to give a brief summary of the learning that has come quite late in my life. The topics covered include Indigenous people before contact with Europeans; initial contact; the concept of "terra nullius" (the land was "empty" when the Europeans arrived); the Doctrine of Discovery; the Royal Proclamation of 1763 issued by King George III; the Canadian Confederation (which was entered into without the participation of the settlers' first allies, the Indigenous peoples); the Indian Act; treaties between First Nations and the government; residential schools; land claims; and current developments. Taken together, these topics would constitute a basic "Indigenous Studies 101" course, which the vast majority of Canadians have never received within the public school system. I have heard several Indigenous individuals say how tired they are of explaining these facts to non-Indigenous people—facts that, although obvious and lived by the former group,

---

<sup>2</sup> See Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, 155.

<sup>3</sup> Among the books which I found most helpful were *The Inconvenient Indian* by Cherokee author Thomas King (which covers both Canadian and American history) and *Unsettling The Settler Within* by Paulette Regan, a non-Indigenous professor who calls non-Indigenous people to own the true history of Canada and to

---

undertake the difficult task of decolonizing themselves.



have been largely ignored by mainstream society until recently.<sup>4</sup>

In *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states, "A massive dose of truth must be administered to heal this chronic old disease of falsehood" (43). Bahá'u'lláh, in a prayer, asks God "to graciously assist them that have been led astray to be just and fair-minded, and to make them aware of that whereof they have been heedless" (*Bahá'í Prayers* 40). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) has provided that "massive dose of truth" through its hard work looking into the legacy of residential schools and Canada's colonial history. Through the work of both RCAP and the TRC, as well as many authors, a firm baseline of accurate history has now been established. My friend Bob Watts Jr.<sup>5</sup> believes there is a direct line between the pathologies in Indigenous communities today and residential schools. But before any healing could begin in our country, the truth needed to be told first.

---

4 Better awareness was achieved when, in 2012, Idle No More began its grassroots movement among Indigenous people in Canada to protest impending parliamentary bills that would erode Indigenous sovereignty and environmental protections.

5 Bob Watts is the grandson of Jim and Melba Loft, the first Indigenous Bahá'í couple in Canada. He is an adjunct professor and fellow in the School of Policy Studies, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario; the recipient of an Indspire Award for Public Service; and a frequent speaker on Indigenous issues.

We are currently living through what feels like a watershed moment in Canadian history. The federal government has committed to implementing the ninety-four recommendations of the TRC. The same newspapers that seldom reported on the subject now publish many stories concerning Indigenous issues. There are now, at any given time, thirty thousand Indigenous people enrolled in post-secondary educational institutions. Newer, more accurate history is being offered in curricula from primary school to university. The Canadian Courts have ruled in favor of Indigenous rights claims in hundreds of cases. The city of Winnipeg, whose serious racism problem was exposed publicly by *Maclean's* magazine in January 2015<sup>6</sup>, has already begun a grassroots process of addressing racism and reconciliation that finally is breaking down walls between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.<sup>7</sup> Initiatives to effect reconciliation are popping up everywhere.

Justice Murray Sinclair, chair of the TRC, stated at the unveiling of its final report in Ottawa in December 2015 that "[a] period of change is beginning that, if sustained by the will of the people, will forever realign the shared history of Indigenous and

---

6 See "Welcome to Winnipeg Where Canada's Racism Problem Is At Its Worst" by Nancy Macdonald, *Maclean's Magazine* (2 Feb. 2015):16-24.

7 See "Taking a Stand" by Nancy Macdonald, *Maclean's Magazine* (8 Feb. 2016): 28-29.



non-Indigenous peoples” (“Justice Murray Sinclair’s Remarks”). Justice Sinclair has, however, cautioned that because the residential school system and attempts at assimilation endured for many generations, it will likewise take many generations to heal and make things right.

As I grieve Wilfred’s passing and inevitably wonder, as his family and friends may be doing, if more could have been done to prevent his death, I often recall a particular quote from the 28 December 2010 message of the Universal House of Justice introducing the 2011-2016 Five Year Plan. It states that the Bahá’í community must become larger and larger in size to allow the Administrative Order<sup>8</sup> to serve “as a pattern for future society”:

How could it be otherwise? A small community, whose members are united by their shared beliefs, characterized by their high ideals, proficient in managing their affairs and tending to their needs, and perhaps engaged in several humanitarian projects—a community such as this, prospering but at a comfortable distance from the reality experienced by the masses of humanity, can never hope to serve as a pattern for restructuring the whole of society. (¶14)

---

8 A Bahá’í term indicating the system of institutions that administers the affairs of the Bahá’í community.

Through my study of history I have come to understand to some small degree the reasons for this harsh reality lived by my neighbors and friends of the Stoney Nakoda First Nation and “experienced by the masses of society.” This article will later discuss how the framework of community building given to the Bahá’í world in recent plans by the Universal House of Justice is now gradually being implemented on the Stoney Nakoda First Nation, with a few active participants coming from the reserve itself. With Wilfred’s family, we were at the very early stages of implementing the Ruhi curriculum and junior youth program.<sup>9</sup> May Wilfred’s spirit and those of his relatives and ancestors in the next world fortify our exertions in the years ahead.

#### BEGINNINGS

My first impulses to reach out to Indigenous communities derived from two statements in the Bahá’í Writings. The first is ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s well-known prophecy about Indigenous peoples: “Likewise, these Indians, should they be educated and guided, there can be no doubt that they will become so

---

9 The educational curriculum designed by the Ruhi Institute includes a special program for children between the ages of twelve and fifteen (commonly referred to as “junior youth”) to “offer a setting in which young people can discuss ideas and form a strong moral identity” (“Overview”).

illuminated as to enlighten the whole world.” (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel* 16). This assertion has inspired generations of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Bahá'ís, including myself, to attempt to reach out to Indigenous populations throughout the Americas. In a letter dated 29 July 1957, Shoghi Effendi states plainly that “it is their right, and the duty of the non-Indian Bahá'ís, to see that they receive the Message of God for this day” (quoted in *Compilation* 222). Although it is certain that the most effective teaching of Indigenous people will be done by Indigenous Bahá'ís, I believe everyone has a role to play, whether direct or indirect, in educating ourselves, making our Bahá'í communities welcoming, working for justice, ridding ourselves of any vestiges of racism or paternalism, and contributing to processes of reconciliation.

Another passage about the importance of this service also touched me:

Let anyone who feels the urge among the participators in this crusade . . . direct in particular their attention, and win eventually the unqualified adherence, of the Negro, the Indian, the Eskimo, and Jewish races to his Faith. No more laudable and meritorious service can be rendered the Cause of God, at the present hour, than a successful effort to enhance the diversity of the members of the American Bahá'í community by swelling the ranks of the Faith through the enrollment of the

members of these races. (Shoghi Effendi, *Advent* 204)

While we lived in Yellowknife during the late 1970s, I participated in a nine-day training institute and teaching campaign in the Mackenzie region of the Northwest Territories with Indigenous Bahá'ís Hazel Lovelace and Mark Wedge. Through my involvement with this and my attendance at a few Native Councils organized by and for Indigenous Bahá'ís during those years, I caught a vision of the strength of those Indigenous Bahá'ís who had become steadfast in the Covenant and who had made connections between the teachings of the Faith and their cultures. For years, however, I felt tremendous guilt because after the training institute, we taught the Faith to dozens of people in small communities in the Mackenzie region but did not have the resources to help them become active participants in it. On reading the publication *Century of Light*, prepared under the supervision of the Universal House of Justice in 2001, I finally let go of the guilt. I read that during several decades of expansion and consolidation of the Faith in various parts of the world, “there was virtually no type of teaching activity, no combination of expansion, consolidation and proclamation, no administrative option, no effort at cultural adaptation that was not being energetically tried in some part of the Bahá'í world” (103). It was this experience that led to the systematization of the teaching work

and, in particular, the development of the Ruhi Institute in Colombia, “a systematic and sustained programme of education in the Writings” (*Century of Light* 109).

I first met the Stoney Nakoda people in 1980 through Arthur Irwin, an early believer who had, with his wife Lily Ann, reached out to several First Nations in the Treaty 7 region and taught the Faith to the first members of the Siksika (Blackfoot), Piikani (Peigan), and Stoney Nakoda Nations (Verge 52, 70, 308). My experience of not being able to follow up with the newly enrolled Bahá'ís in the Northwest Territories eventually lead me to make a long-term commitment to developing friendships. But at first, though I never “preached,” for a while I probably acted in somewhat of a “missionary” mode: I was convinced of the truth of the Faith but did not know how to follow Shoghi Effendi’s guidance to “adapt the presentation of the fundamental principles” of the Faith to “divers races and nations” (*Citadel* 26). It was difficult being a white woman bringing a religion, and it must have been looked upon with hesitation, if not outright suspicion, especially given the fraught history of religions within the Indigenous communities in Canada. I had much to learn about how to teach and interact in a genuine way with my Indigenous friends.

As one serves, one also becomes much more self-aware. Part of my spiritual journey has entailed learning more about my own background. My

grandparents on my father’s side had emigrated from Ireland. My mother and her parents immigrated to Canada from Croatia, which was then part of the former Yugoslavia. In learning about these cultures—especially the Irish one—I realized that both of these peoples had also undergone centuries of oppression. In Ireland, I discovered similarities with the tribal life of the First Nations cultures I had met, such as the community support for families during times of grief and a strong attachment to land, freedom, and identity.

In the 1980s, I began a long period of healing from the disease of alcoholism, which had plagued the Irish side of my family for generations. Before becoming a Bahá'í in my mid-twenties I drank alcohol, and my drinking patterns were those of an alcoholic, but I had no difficulty giving it up as Bahá'ís are prohibited from consuming alcohol. But it took years for me to gain full awareness of the impact that my family background had on me—how it fostered such unhealthy attitudes as lack of trust, pervasive anxiety, low self-worth, and a need for control. I began the process of personal healing with help from counselors, prayer, the Bahá'í Writings, and emerging research in the field of addiction. While undertaking this process I realized that addiction was responsible for some situations I encountered on the reserve, and as I learned more about Indigenous history, I finally made the profound and emotional connections between residential schools and addiction.

Along the way, someone said to me (in connection with reaching out to Indigenous cultures), “You just need one friend.” I was indeed extremely lucky to form several deep and genuine friendships with Indigenous Bahá'ís. Their kindness and acceptance helped me learn and kept me from making too many mistakes—though I've often said I've made every mistake in the book. Fear of mistakes should not keep us from forging relationships as long as we learn from them. I believe that if our hearts and motives are pure, people are ready to forgive and reach out in return. In fact, I have been astonished, given their history, at Indigenous peoples' ability to forgive and their readiness to respond to genuine friendship.

Once, while on the Piikani (Peigan) Nation at Christmastime, I went with Gayle Strikes With A Gun to visit her brother and his wife at their home. There were dishes of candy, mandarin oranges, and fruitcake on the coffee table. Gayle's sister-in-law offered me something, and I declined politely, having just eaten. Gayle said to me quickly, “Pat, you must accept, otherwise they'll think you feel you're too good for their food.” I was so grateful to Gayle for caring enough for me as a friend to be honest with me so I wouldn't offend those who had welcomed me into their home.

Upon the publication of my biography of the Continental Board of Counsellors member Angus Cowan, *Angus: From the Heart*, Allison Healy of the Kainai Reserve and I made a trip across

the Prairies and into British Columbia to speak about Angus's life and revisit the areas in which he had served side by side with First Nations communities. Allison's friendships with people through the Powwow Trail opened many doors that I could never have entered as a non-Indigenous woman. As a member of the Bahá'í Council,<sup>10</sup> she also consistently supported the Bahá'í service on Stoney Nakoda First Nation. In addition, Deb Clement, who is of Cree descent and was adopted into the Blackfoot Nation, and Beverley Knowlton, originally from the Piikani First Nation, accompanied me to Stoney Nakoda.

I have never wanted to be a missionary or to be seen as one! However, I needed to find a way to connect with people on the reserve other than during Bahá'í service. Not being skilled in traditional crafts and arts, such as beading and painting, it was hard to find common interests or activities where I could join the local community and make more friends. In 1992, I finally found an activity that I really loved and in which I could freely participate when the Nakoda community began its revival of the round dance. In this dance, which is essentially spiritual, participants clasp hands with others and move in a clockwise circle to the beat of the drum. At the very first round dance I attended,

---

10 An element of Bahá'í administration, between the local and national levels, instituted by the Universal House of Justice (Letter, 30 May 1997).

I was the only non-Indigenous person there. My friend Sheila Holloway was sitting across the room and I made a bee-line for her! I loved the round dances and for many years attended as many as possible, always feeling welcome and treated with respect. My intentions had evolved to wanting to become true friends with the Stoney Nakoda people—to gain trust and to show my deep respect for their culture. Through the round dance I met and became close with the late Nakoda elder Beatrice Poucette—a teepee holder at the Calgary Stampede—whose son Mark had been instrumental in bringing the round dance back to the reserve. In the 1990s, through Beatrice—and as an effort to build bridges between the people of Stoney Nakoda and the non-Indigenous community of Cochrane, about thirty minutes away—the Cochrane Bahá'ís sponsored two round dances with participation from both communities.

These friendships taught me much. I found that if the desire is there, a way will open to learn more. For example, every year the Calgary Stampede features an Indian Village, where members of the five tribes of Treaty 7 camp during the ten-day celebration. Visitors can learn about Indian history, teepees, traditional garments, foods, games, and powwows, as well as mingle with people from all over the world. There is a genuine effort to educate people in Indigenous ways. In Alberta there are world-class museums and interpretive centers such as the Glenbow Museum in Calgary,

Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump near Fort Macleod, and Blackfoot Crossing, which is located at the site where Treaty 7 was signed and showcases Blackfoot culture. All powwows are open to visitors. These are some of the ways in which I became aware of the incredible richness of the Indigenous cultures around me—cultures that have been experiencing a renaissance during the past few decades.

While doing research for my memoir, I had the privilege of attending three sessions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. As heart-wrenching as these sessions were, they fostered my understanding of why conditions in Indigenous communities are the way they are; why our communities have, for the most part, lived such vastly different realities; and why we are in great need of reconciliation and healing relationships.

As I made friends and got to know people better, I was invited to birthdays, baby showers, weddings, and far too many wakes and funerals. There were other young people like Wilfred who died too soon. It was here especially that I saw the strong community bonds that characterize Indigenous communities. The whole community supports the family throughout the grieving process.

In the early years of teaching at Morley, we focused on building friendships, helping the friends form their Local Spiritual Assembly every year, organizing an annual picnic, assisting the Bahá'ís to attend activities in Cochrane and regional summer camps.

When the Ruhi curriculum became available, and when we met the Amos family, we began children's classes and, eventually, worked with junior youth and adults. Transportation, even to facilities on the widespread reserve, was and still is, often a challenge for the Stoney Nakoda people. The advent of the cellular phone and the wide availability of Internet services have made a huge difference for them, strengthening their connections to each other and to friends off-reserve and providing them with access to knowledge from around the world.

While many Bahá'ís from off-reserve, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, rose to serve on Stoney Nakoda First Nation over the years, our service was not completely consistent, and few human resources emerged from the Nakoda community itself. Shoghi Effendi emphasized that "pioneers from a foreign land can never take the place of native believers, who must always constitute the bedrock of any future development of the Faith in their country" (*Compilation* 206).

#### TENSIONS

Perhaps we need to deal, at least in part, with tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Bahá'ís. While I prefer to write about the tremendous learning and richness that friendships with Indigenous people have brought into my life, it's obvious that Canadian and, by extension, American citizens, including Bahá'ís, have for the most part not been well informed about the

history of colonialism in North America and how it affects our relationship patterns. Learning about it is essential to creating respectful relationships that are free of paternalism:

Nor should any of the pioneers, at this early stage in the upbuilding of Bahá'í national communities, overlook the fundamental prerequisite for any successful teaching enterprise, which is to adapt the presentation of the fundamental principles of their Faith to the cultural and religious backgrounds, the ideologies, and the temperament of the diverse races and nations whom they are called upon to enlighten and attract. The susceptibilities of these races and nations . . . differing widely in their customs and standards of living, should at all times be carefully considered, and under no circumstances neglected. (Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel* 25)

I wade into the subject of the tensions between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Bahá'ís with a great deal of trepidation. Shoghi Effendi has stated that it "is difficult for the friends to always remember that in matter[s] where race enters, a hundred times more consideration and wisdom in handling situations is necessary than when an issue is not complicated by this factor" (qtd. in Ewing 29).

I read something about communication recently that struck me: "The biggest communication problem is we do



not listen to understand. We listen to reply.” (*EnergyTherapy.biz*). For me, in conversations about healing, reconciliation, and oneness, it’s been important to learn to listen with humility and not always jump in with my own ideas. It’s not an easy lesson. Non-Indigenous people have dominated the conversation for so long—and in our Bahá’í communities too. It requires much self-awareness, humility, and selflessness to maintain a posture of learning. As I mentioned earlier, I am so grateful to those Indigenous Bahá’ís who have taken me under their wing and overlooked my many slip-ups.

Even though we Bahá’ís were not implicated in the residential schools, this part of Canadian history, as well as the whole history of relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, belongs to us, whether we have been Canadians for generations or are relative newcomers to this country. Since the TRC hearings, many have said in regards to reconciliation that “we are all Treaty people.” In other words, all Canadians have a responsibility for the promises that were made on behalf of the people of Canada to the Indigenous communities.

I have become acutely aware of the privilege I enjoy and the oppression I have *not* had to endure simply because of my background. The following letter from Shoghi Effendi to a committee responsible for teaching Indigenous people, sheds a great deal of light on the attitudes we must develop in order to be effective:

He was very pleased to hear of initial steps you have taken to teach the Indians. He adds one suggestion (he does not know if it is practicable or not): can contact not be made with Indians who have become more or less absorbed into the life of the white element of the country and live in or visit the big cities? These people, finding the Bahá’ís sincerely lacking in either prejudice—or that even worse attitude, condescension—might not only take interest in our Teachings, but also help us to reach their people in the proper way.

It is a great mistake to believe that because people are illiterate or live primitive lives, they are lacking in either intelligence or sensibility. On the contrary, they may well look on us, with the evils of our civilization, with its moral corruption, its ruinous wars, its hypocrisy and conceit, as people who merit watching with both suspicion and contempt. We should meet them as equals, well-wishers, people who admire and respect their ancient descent, and who feel that they will be interested, as we are, in a living religion and not in the dead forms of present-day churches. (*Compilation* 208)

#### LEARNING

In *The Advent of Divine Justice*, Shoghi Effendi describes the spiritual



prerequisites for success in any service the Bahá'ís are attempting to carry out. They include rectitude of conduct, a chaste and holy life, and freedom from racial prejudice (18–34). He also calls racial prejudice the “most . . . challenging issue” facing the Bahá'í community (23). While he was primarily referring to the relationships between African American and white believers, I've often thought that these qualities also apply to relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Bahá'ís, and that they are a fruitful subject of meditation for those who wish to contribute to this important field. Shoghi Effendi speaks in this letter about the “tremendous effort” needed by both races “if their outlook, their manners, and conduct are to reflect, in this darkened age, the spirit and teachings of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh” (39). He calls for the white race

to abandon once and for all their usually inherent and at times subconscious sense of superiority, to correct their tendency towards revealing a patronizing attitude towards the members of the other race, to persuade them through their intimate, spontaneous and informal association with them of the genuineness of their friendship and the sincerity of their intentions, and to master their impatience of any lack of responsiveness on the part of a people who have received, for so long a period, such grievous and slow-healing wounds. (33–34)

The phrase “master their impatience of any lack of responsiveness” has given me much food for reflection, as has the phrase “such grievous and slow-healing wounds.”

Shoghi Effendi goes on to appeal to the black race to “show by every means in their power the warmth of their response, their readiness to forget the past, and their ability to wipe out every trace of suspicion that may still linger in their hearts and minds” (*Advent* 39). He cautions the Bahá'ís that they should not wait for the problem to be solved outside of the Faith. He then calls them to the spiritual qualities that will be needed:

Let neither think that anything short of genuine love, extreme patience, true humility, consummate tact, sound initiative, mature wisdom, and deliberate, persistent, and prayerful effort, can succeed in blotting out the stain which this patent evil has left on the fair name of their common country. (*Advent* 39)

In the materials prepared for the worldwide Bahá'í youth conferences held from July to October 2013, a whole section is entitled “Fostering Mutual Support and Assistance.” In this section, an imaginary conversation is set up where several youth discuss the true friendships that must be established between the youth as they serve together. One youth says, “I think when people become true friends, and

are constantly encouraging each other, even what may at first seem impossible becomes achievable. Then service becomes pure joy, and the circle of friends grows” (*Youth Conferences* 6, 7).

Building relationships is always important, but within the Indigenous communities—as many have told me, and as I have discovered—it is requisite for any progress to occur. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá exhorts us: “Concern yourselves with one another. Help along one another’s projects and plans. Grieve over one another. Let none in the whole country go in need. Befriend one another until ye become as a single body, one and all” (qtd. in Hornby 178).

I was always struck by a comment made by Jacqueline Left Hand Bull, who greatly supported the service on Stoney Nakoda First Nation while she was a member of the Continental Board of Counsellors. She said that we as Bahá’ís do not go to the reserves as social workers. I have often thought about that. While we are not there to “fix” people’s problems, at the same time we need to be aware of people’s conditions—why they are the way they are—and to be “anxiously concerned with the needs of the age [w]e live in, and center [our] deliberations on its exigencies and requirements” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Gleanings* 106:1).

When I realized my family’s drinking problem—and after a combination of alcohol and prescription drug caused the early death of my oldest nephew, Mike—I felt obliged to urge my relatives to do something about

the alcoholism in our family. No one in the family was receptive, and I felt like I was in the depths of despair. When I related this to a friend, she gave me an image that was at once funny and instructive. She likened my actions to a big semi-trailer truck rolling down the highway toward me while I stood in the middle of the road waving a stop sign. Sometimes, if I’ve dwelt too much on the tragedies that occur or the seeming lack of consistent results from our outreach work, or if I have tried to do a “social work” type of service that I am not professionally qualified to do, I bring myself back to a place of trust in the latest guidance from the Universal House of Justice about building capacity within the community. Social breakdown is inevitable in this time of transition to the spiritual world order envisioned by Bahá’u’lláh. However, we have been given clear guidance and a framework within which to work. Of course there are, and increasingly will be, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Bahá’ís who, through their professions, will be deeply involved in bettering social and economic conditions within Indigenous communities. The following words from the Universal House of Justice in the Ridván 2010 message to the Bahá’ís of the world, stating that the community building process we are engaged in will unfold over centuries, have given me perspective and a renewed desire to continue:

Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation is vast. It calls for profound change not only

at the level of the individual but also in the structure of society. “Is not the object of every Revelation”, He Himself proclaims, “to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions?” The work advancing in every corner of the globe today represents the latest stage of the ongoing Bahá'í endeavour to create the nucleus of the glorious civilization enshrined in His teachings, the building of which is an enterprise of infinite complexity and scale, one that will demand centuries of exertion by humanity to bring to fruition. There are no shortcuts, no formulas. Only as effort is made to draw on insights from His Revelation, to tap into the accumulating knowledge of the human race, to apply His teachings intelligently to the life of humanity, and to consult on the questions that arise will the necessary learning occur and capacity be developed. (¶25)

#### RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

In 2009, the Bahá'í Council of Alberta designated the Rockyview-Big Horn Cluster where I live and which contains the three Stoney Nakoda Reserves of Morley, Bighorn, and Eden Valley—as an area for intensive growth. They particularly referred to

the Stoney Nakoda people as a receptive population. For a very short time, within my own heart I resisted this new step. After nearly thirty years of building friendships, I did not feel that the Indigenous people were sufficiently involved in the community-building activities. However, the Bahá'í Council promised there would be outside assistance to encourage increased participation by the inhabitants of the reservation.

A Persian youth from Calgary, Leva Eghbali, began to travel to Stoney Nakoda First Nation with her mother Humeyra to teach children's classes. Eventually she invited her friend Sama Imamverdi, and with their families, we began to be much more consistent in our activities. Eventually, other youth also participated. At the same time we were visiting Beatrice Poucette at an elders' lodge on the reserve and had received permission for the Bahá'ís to hold a few meetings there, such as a holy day observance and a devotional. In summer 2011, we hosted a three-day summer camp at the lodge, as it was no longer being used for elders. That fall, the manager said we could hold weekly children's classes and junior youth groups at the lodge. We started out meeting biweekly, but by the following year we were holding the classes every week. It was the first time we had ever been that consistent. A breakthrough came in 2012 when one of the Nakoda junior youth accompanied Leva and Sama to the community school and spoke about our junior youth spiritual empowerment

program.<sup>11</sup> The ranks of the junior youth participating swelled that year.

From fall 2013 to fall 2014, Leva and Sama took time off from their university studies to live in Cochrane and dedicate a year of service to Morley. The Cochrane Bahá'í community, the Bahá'í Council, and their parents supported them as much as possible. Sama's mother, Shamim Alavi, advised her to take every possible opportunity to serve that arose that year. Indeed, the two young women walked through every door that opened and received boundless confirmations from Bahá'u'lláh. With support from the principal, they began to volunteer daily at the Morley Community School, organizing talent shows and a club to raise school spirit, and offering other services as needed. They also made contact with Cathy Arcega, director of the Bearspaw Youth Engagement Strategy. She invited Leva and Sama to offer the junior youth program to junior youth who came to the youth center after school. The young women befriended many youth; attended sweats, cultural camps, powwows, community gatherings, and hip-hop camps; and volunteered at Christmas parties and for the production of a short film on drug abuse—to name only a few of their extensive activities that year. Partway through the year, they began to offer a study of the 2013 worldwide youth conference materials, of the junior youth materials (especially *Glimmerings of Hope*, to which

the Nakoda youth related well), and then of Ruhi Book One.

I am fortunate to be part of the small team that grew out of that intense period. The team is supported by the Regional Bahá'í Council and the institute coordinator, who serves alongside tutors of the Ruhi books, as well as children's class teachers and junior youth group animators. Leva and Sama opened doors for me, too, so that I was able to serve on a larger coordinating team for youth development on the reserve—the Stoney Nakoda Youth Collaborative, which includes the youth director, the police force (RCMP), the Nakoda Youth Council, Alberta Health, Canada Bridges (a Calgary-based foundation), and others. Youth activities of all kinds—including sports, cultural activities, a youth drop-in, and a cadet program—have grown exponentially on the reserve. Our small team suggested, and has subsequently attended, three retreats with this group. Doing so has forged unity of vision and close bonds of friendship and has helped us to clarify and explain our Bahá'í-inspired activities and our motivations.

Since Leva's and Sama's year of service ended, our Bahá'í-inspired activities have remained constant, occurring once weekly and also during school breaks and summers. While participation has remained limited, we have sustained a devotional, a children's class, and a study circle, and recently have been working on re-establishing a junior youth group. A few Nakoda youth have attended youth conferences

---

11 See note 9.

and intensive Ruhi courses in Calgary and Morley, served at regional winter and spring Bahá'í schools, and taken a road trip to Saskatoon to visit the junior youth groups there. Assisted by Leva and Sama, a youth is serving as a children's class teacher and another as a tutor. Our regular reflection meetings now include everyone, not just those from off-reserve. We have resisted expanding too quickly, as would be easy to do, without the increased participation of the youth from Morley, because without building local capacity, anything we start would not be sustainable.

#### TAKING OWNERSHIP

This brings me to the issue with which I have struggled for a long time—that of the Indigenous Bahá'ís taking more responsibility for their involvement in the Faith. The Universal House of Justice said that passivity “is bred by the forces of society today. A desire to be entertained is nurtured from childhood, with increasing efficiency, cultivating generations willing to be led by whoever proves skilful at appealing to superficial emotions” (“Ridván Message” 10). Personally, I come from a Roman Catholic background where the priest acts on behalf of the congregation. It is not just Indigenous communities that have been programmed to passivity; this is a widespread phenomenon.

In the same letter, the Universal House of Justice describes the framework of action within which the

Bahá'ís are now serving as “a process that seeks to raise capacity within a population to take charge of its own spiritual, social and intellectual development” (¶5). It continues:

The activities that drive this process (devotional meetings, children's classes, junior youth groups and study circles) . . . may well need to be maintained with assistance from outside the local population for a time. It is to be expected, however, that the multiplication of these core activities would soon be sustained by human resources indigenous to the neighborhood or village itself—by men and women eager to improve material and spiritual conditions in their surroundings. (¶5)

Because of my early experience in the North, when we were unable to help the new Indigenous Bahá'ís become fully engaged with the Faith, I have felt strongly about the importance of institute training. It has done my heart such good to hear the youth who have returned from intensive study of institute courses speaking of the Manifestations of God or of having elevated conversations. At the same time, Daniel Scott, then a member of the Continental Board of Counsellors, cautioned members of our team not to put all the weight on the institute process. He mentioned, as we ourselves have discovered, that the whole process needs to be bolstered

with the gamut of activities in which one would expect true friends to participate—such as helping each other with homework, going to movies, attending holy day celebrations and other community activities together, and interacting with each other through social media. Indeed, I see our Bahá'í youth doing this. For example, they were instrumental in helping one of the Nakoda youth register for university and find a place to live in Calgary while he studied there.

The words of the Universal House of Justice at Ridván 2010 encourage us to “find those souls longing to shed the lethargy imposed on them by society and work alongside one another in their neighbourhoods and villages to begin a process of collective transformation” (“Ridván Message” ¶6). Once we find these souls, they themselves begin to build the foundations for a deep transformation, both of individuals and, indeed, of the larger community and culture. The following quotation from the Universal House of Justice’s 28 December 2010 message to the Continental Boards of Counsellors contains that astonishing promise:

It should be apparent to all that the process set in motion by the current series of global Plans, seeks, in the approaches it takes and the methods it employs, to build capacity in every human group, with no regard for class or religious background, with no concern for ethnicity or race,

irrespective of gender or social status, to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization. We pray that, as it steadily unfolds, its potential to disable every instrument devised by humanity over the long period of its childhood for one group to oppress another may be realized. (34)

#### GAZING AHEAD

With the advent of the latest Five Year Plan of the Universal House of Justice,<sup>12</sup> we may be better able to visualize new developments for the Stoney Nakoda First Nation if we maintain our focus. In its 29 December 2015 message, the Universal House of Justice gives a glimpse into what must happen and alludes to the delicacy of the role that those from outside the community must play:

The pattern of community life has to be developed in places where receptivity wells up, those small centres of population where intense activity can be sustained. It is here, when carrying out the work of community building within such a narrow compass, that the interlocking dimensions of community life are most coherently expressed, here that the

---

<sup>12</sup> The fourth in the succession of Five Year Plans (2016–2021) instigated by the Universal House of Justice for the purpose of systematizing the expansion of the Faith worldwide.



process of collective transformation is most keenly felt—here that, in time, the society-building power inherent in the Faith becomes most visible. (¶ 17)

The Universal House of Justice goes on to explain the qualities required to work in these neighborhoods and villages, indicating that a long-term commitment is needed and that too much outside attention can smother an emerging pattern of action:

Therefore, a significant task facing you and your auxiliaries at the outset of the coming Plan will be to assist the friends everywhere to appreciate that, for existing programmes of growth to continue to gain strength, the strategy of initiating community-building activities in neighbourhoods and villages that show promise must be widely adopted and systematically followed. Individuals serving in such areas learn how to explain the purpose of those activities, how to demonstrate through deeds the purity of their motives, how to nurture environments where the hesitant can be reassured, how to help the inhabitants see the rich possibilities created by working together, and how to encourage them to arise to serve the best interests of their society. Yet, recognizing the real value of this work should also increase awareness of its delicate character. An emerging pattern

of action in a small area can easily be smothered by too much outside attention; accordingly, the number of friends who move to such locations or visit them frequently need not be great since, after all, the process being set in motion is essentially one that depends on the residents themselves. What is required from those involved, however, is long-term commitment and a yearning to become so familiar with the reality of a place that they integrate into local life and, eschewing any trace of prejudice or paternalism, form those bonds of true friendship that befit companions on a spiritual journey. The dynamic that develops in such settings creates a strong sense of collective will and movement. (¶ 18)

This year, the Stoney Nakoda First Nation has become its own cluster. Gazing to the future, the team serving here will need to rise to the challenge of observing three-month growth cycles for the whole Five Year Plan. This will necessitate training tutors from the local community, expanding core activities and accompanying those individuals who arise to serve. This fall the team is planning a youth conference for Morley, with local facilitators and utilizing the materials and format of the 2013 worldwide youth conferences. The vision is for the conference to become annual, progressively engaging more youth in arising to better themselves and their community.

A challenge we must meet is to involve families more extensively so that the activities will truly be understood as community building and not just as drop-off activities meant to entertain children and keep them busy. Some of our most successful activities have involved the use of the arts, including dance, drama, rap music, and painting, so we will need to learn how to integrate the arts more frequently. Efforts are ongoing to approach the elders to explain the institute process and its significance for community building, and to request their advice and assistance as we move forward. Slowly, as individuals begin to recognize the station of Bahá'u'lláh and the breadth

of His Revelation, they will make their own connections between their rich traditional ways and the Bahá'í teachings. It is likely that, as the Universal House of Justice has told us, the participants will be drawn "further and further into the life of society and would be challenged to extend the process of systematic learning in which they are engaged to encompass a widening range of human endeavours" ("Ridván Message" ¶ 27).

My own deepest wish and prayer is to serve as long as God gives me strength and to see the healing message of Bahá'u'lláh touch the hearts and lives of my Stoney Nakoda friends and neighbors.

#### WORKS CITED

- 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970. Print.
- Bahá'u'lláh. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990. Print.
- Bahá'í Prayers and Selected Holy Writings*. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2007. Print.
- The Compilation of Compilations*. Vol 3. Ingleside, NSW: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 2000. Print.
- EnergyTherapy.biz*. Energy Therapy, n.d. Web. 28 Feb. 2016.
- Ewing, Tod, ed. *Toward Oneness: A Compilation on Racial and Cultural Issues*. Riviera Beach, FL: Palabra Publications, 1998. Print.
- Hornby, Helen Bassett, ed. *Lights of Guidance*. New Delhi, India: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2001. Print.
- King, Thomas. *The Inconvenient Indian: A Curious Account of Native People in North America*. Toronto, ON: Doubleday Canada, 2012. Print.
- "Justice Murray Sinclair's Remarks on the Truth and Reconciliation Report." Rogers Media, 15 Dec. 2015. Web. 28 Feb. 2016.

- Macdonald, Nancy. "Welcome to Winnipeg Where Canada's Racism Problem Is At Its Worst." *Maclean's Magazine* (2 Feb. 2015): 16–24. Print.
- . "Taking a Stand." *Maclean's Magazine* (8 Feb. 2016): 28–29. Print.
- "Overview." *Ruhi.org*. The Ruhi Foundation, n.d. Web. 28 Feb. 2016.
- Regan, Paulette. *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada*. Vancouver, Toronto: UBC Press, 2010. Print.
- Shoghi Effendi. *The Advent of Divine Justice*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971. Print.
- . *Citadel of Faith*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980. Print.
- . *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991. Print.
- The Universal House of Justice. *Century of Light*. Bahá'í World Centre, 2001. Print.
- . Message to the Continental Boards of Counsellors, 28 Dec. 2010.
- . Message to the Continental Boards of Counsellors, 29 Dec. 2015.
- . "Regional Bahá'í Councils." Document enclosed with letter to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 30 May 1997.
- . Ridván Message, 2010.
- Verge, Patricia. *Angus: From the Heart: The Life of Counsellor Angus Cowan*. Cochrane, AB: Springtide Publishing, 1999. Print.
- Youth Conferences, July–October 2013, Participant Materials. Section 3. Fostering Mutual Support and Assistance.

# A Necessary History: Teaching On and Off the Reservations

LINDA S. COVEY

## *Abstract*

This article draws on the history of Bahá'í teaching activities on and off Indian reservations and reviews the early Bahá'í literature directed toward American Indian Baha'is with the goal of understanding and learning from that history. The teaching work conducted by the Central States Regional American Indian Teaching is examined to show examples of what worked, what didn't, and why. Conclusions are drawn as to what behaviors and actions are needed now to reinvigorate the indigenous teaching field.

## *Resumé*

Dans le présent article, l'auteur part de l'histoire des activités d'enseignement bahá'í dans les réserves et hors des réserves indiennes, et il passe en revue les premières publications bahá'íes orientées vers les bahá'ís amérindiens dans le but de comprendre cette histoire et d'en tirer un apprentissage. L'auteur examine le travail d'enseignement mené par le Comité d'enseignement régional amérindien servant dans les États du Centre pour donner des exemples de ce qui a fonctionné, de ce qui n'a pas fonctionné et pourquoi. Il conclut en formulant des observations sur les comportements et les actions qui sont maintenant nécessaires pour revitaliser le domaine de l'enseignement autochtone.

## *Resumen*

Este artículo recurre a la historia de actividades bahá'ís de enseñanza en y fuera de las reservas indígenas y revisa la literatura bahá'í temprana dirigida hacia los indígenas americanos bahá'ís con la meta de entender y aprender de esa historia. El trabajo de enseñanza llevado a cabo por El Comité Regional de los Estados Centrales para la Enseñanza a los Indígenas Americanos es examinado para demostrar ejemplos de qué ha funcionado, lo que no ha funcionado y por qué. Se llegan a conclusiones acerca de cuáles comportamientos y acciones se necesitan ahora para revigorar el campo de la enseñanza indígena.

Perhaps the best way to know where we are going is to reflect on where we have been. While some people may find history—facts and figures, names and dates, icons and symbols—relatively unimportant and possibly dull and boring, history is the story of how we got to where we are. More importantly, history shapes our individual lives even as it shapes our cultures and our collective future.

As we are aware, history has been recorded in some form since the earliest dawning of civilization, whether on stones, cave walls, wood, leather, bones, or leaves—its authors using whatever crudely crafted instruments were available. The oldest method for recording history is the oral tradition, whereby genealogies and family or tribal histories were passed down through the generations. Narrated as stories, such history chronicles the passing of seasons, provides cultural

context, and relates experiential wisdom that may help us prepare for what may lay ahead. Whatever form it takes, history is the invaluable repository of the past—our collective memory—and, when studied, one of our greatest teachers. Certainly, it is a guidepost to the future. By analogy, it is similar to the ancient *inuksuit*, the Arctic Inuit's stones arranged in tall human forms that rise above the frozen tundra, standing solidly with outstretched arms on two widely-spaced legs. For a weary Inuit traveler, the sight of an *inuksuk* meant security and provided a point of reference for travel routes to camps, fishing sites, hunting grounds, and sacred places. Sighting an *inuksuk* often meant the hope of survival for the weary wanderer, who obtained sustenance from caches of food buried beneath the snow at the feet of these tall, silent giants—bounty bequeathed by the benevolence of previous travelers as a gift for those who would follow. Similarly, our knowledge of history can provide us with the benefits left for us by the wisdom of tribal medicine men and bards. By the same token, it is the intent of this narrative to provide a useful retrospective on the relationship between the Bahá'í community and the Indigenous peoples in North America—and possibly even a guidepost for the continuation of this noble spiritual effort at community building among peoples of diverse cultures and spiritual orientations.<sup>1</sup>

1 Following common usage, the terms “Indians” and “Natives” is used

I offer this brief historical account of the Bahá'í teaching work among the American Indians in four Central States as a case study of what lessons were learned by the non-Indigenous Bahá'ís when sharing the Bahá'í concept of a new revelation with the Native people. Before beginning this account, it is fitting that we revisit a remarkable promise by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that is extremely relevant to any Bahá'í presuming to share his or her beliefs with those of such spiritual capacity and insight as the Indigenous peoples of North America.

In His “Tablet to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada” (1916), 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, “You must attach great importance to the indigenous population of America. . . . these Indians, should they be educated and guided, there can be no doubt that they will become so illumined as to enlighten the whole world” (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel* 16). Many years later, Rúhíyyih *Khánúm*<sup>2</sup> recalled her visits to several American Indian tribes, during which times she expressed

---

interchangeably in this article to designate American Indians/Native Americans.

2 Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih *Khánúm* was the title bestowed on Mary Sutherland Maxwell by her husband Shoghi Effendi (head of the Bahá'í community from 1921 to 1957), who also appointed her Hand of the Cause. The Hands of the Cause of God were a select group of Bahá'ís appointed to this role for life and whose main function was to propagate and protect the Bahá'í Faith.

deep understanding of the impacts and harms of European settlement on Native Americans, including how it interfered with culture, transmission of knowledge and history, and social well-being. She promised them that “the day will come when the Redman will study and know the history of his people” (“Message to the Indian” 6) as an affirmation of the importance of learning and knowing Indigenous histories. The White man has studied the Indians’ way of life for many years, she said, collecting the Indians’ cultural artifacts as “ornaments” (6) and putting them in houses “where thousands of people pay to enter and look at them” (7). She then informed her Indigenous audiences that three calls had come to them—one each from the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá—and reminded them that, during His 1912 visit to America, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said to Indigenous peoples of North America, “Your mission is unspeakably glorious” (9).

Rúhíyyih Khánum did acknowledge the dire problems presently subverting the potential of these noble peoples—namely, poverty, injustice, and lack of education. She tried to encourage them by affirming that if they “could only see with the eye of the spirit,” they would see that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s promise to them “is like a rope” put in the hand of a drowning person in deep water. She went on to say that if the Indigenous peoples will only “hold onto ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s promise,” it will pull them, their children, and their grandchildren “out of the water to safety” (“Message to the Indian” 9).

Non-Native Bahá’ís took to heart ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s injunction about service to Indigenous populations, and to that end, they moved onto or traveled to American Indian reservations and Canadian reserves. Shoghi Effendi reinforced ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s assurances with a reminder in an early Bahá’í newsletter. Addressing the non-Indigenous Bahá’í community, he emphasizes the importance of sharing the teachings of the Faith with the Indians, suggesting that their latent potential could become realized as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had promised:

He [Shoghi Effendi] has always been very anxious to have the Indians taught and enlisted under the banner of the Faith, in view of the Master’s [‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s] remarkable statements about the possibilities of their future and that they represent the aboriginal American population. He attaches the greatest importance to teaching the original inhabitants of the Americas the Faith. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself has stated how great are their potentialities, and it is their right, and the duty of the non-Indian Bahá’ís, to see that they receive the Message of God for this Day (qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* 528).

Subsequently, the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States appointed a committee to facilitate and expedite the efforts to share the Bahá’í teachings about building



a world community beginning at the level of the community. The American Indian Service Committee (AISC) was formed in 1953 to support what Bahá'ís call “pioneers”<sup>3</sup> by supplying them with printed materials, helping with the planning and execution of activities, and providing traveling speakers.

The *Talking Leaves* newsletters (1953–1960), written by the AISC's secretary, Nancy Phillips, are filled with fascinating glimpses of life on the reservation and vignettes from the experiences of those early pioneers.<sup>4</sup> The goal of the pioneers was to inform tribal peoples about the Bahá'í vision of unity in diversity and the need to bring about the abolition of prejudice in order to recognize the oneness of all peoples. The early pioneers were a far-flung group of stalwart souls across reservations in the United States—only thirty Bahá'í teachers among the entire American Indian population by late 1958 (6). As Bahá'ís are forbidden to proselytize, the process of “pioneering” presents the substantial challenge of living among the people and trying

to become accepted, not as missionaries, but simply as another human being trying to share a gift.

Clearly, this was quite a different approach from those of the well-established Catholic and Protestant institutions, whose trained theologians and staff had been on reservations since the late 1800s. Christian missionaries were directed to their posts and provided with training prior to entering the field. Religious institutions financially support their churches on the reservations and their missionaries are given a parish, a mission, or a parsonage to live in, as well as a salary or stipend. This contrasts with the Bahá'í pioneers, who provide for their own needs and fend for themselves, a situation that all too often has led to brief terms of service because paying jobs were and are scarce on the reservations.

The establishment of Bahá'í communities within the American Indian tribal communities was thus extremely challenging. It was especially difficult to develop them to such an extent that they could become autonomous and survive on their own if the pioneers had to leave the reservation or move to another community. Too often, the pioneers were forced to move to locations where jobs and affordable housing could be found.

The ultimate objective for the Bahá'ís who undertook this challenge was to become sufficiently knowledgeable about the Indian culture and customs so that they could become accepted and, eventually,

---

3 There is no clergy and no paid missionary posts in the Bahá'í Faith. The propagation of the Faith is left to individuals who “pioneer” to a community in another land or community and who share the teachings mostly by manifesting spiritual attributes in their daily activities.

4 See Nancy Phillips, *Talking Leaves*. The phrase “talking leaves,” Phillips said, was taken from the Cherokee language for “pages of writing.”

integrated into the local community and assist the Indigenous people in establishing a Local Spiritual Assembly, the elected governing body of a Bahá'í community. For this to be achieved, local inhabitants had to take the Bahá'í teachings to heart, and they had to become sufficiently knowledgeable about Bahá'í administration so that they could participate in this community structure in addition to their own communal and spiritual practices. When this occurred, the community could manage its own internal affairs without the need for pioneers or external assistance.

Rúhíyyih Khánum wrote to the pioneers about two concerns that they should always keep in mind: one is that pioneering should be done “for the *sake of God*” alone—that to do it for any other reason is to invite disappointment (*Manual 21*). Second, she emphasized that pioneers should teach new Bahá'ís that their relationship is with Bahá'u'lláh as a Messenger from God and that their connection to Him is not through the pioneer. In short, the believers should never be made to feel dependent on the individual who has been teaching them about the Bahá'í Faith. It was in this context that Rúhíyyih Khánum likened the pioneer's function to that of a spiritual parent:

It is really all remarkably like a family: the child grows up, begins to assert its freedom and the loving parents see it getting hurt and making mistakes which, if only it

would listen, it would not happen! But the child will not always listen and the parents cannot live its life for it. The Bahá'í pioneer who is a spiritual parent must just resign himself to the same thing. (*Manual 21*)

[A]t least 80 per cent of everything that seems wrong in the beginning will sort itself out within say a year, if the pioneer will be *patient, loving, understanding*, and will *persevere*. (*Manual 98*)

Because teachers of the Faith are explicitly forbidden to proselytize and even though all Bahá'ís are exhorted to teach others about their beliefs, Bahá'u'lláh explains that the attitude of the teacher should be one of humbly offering a precious gift to a friend:

If ye be aware of a certain truth, if ye possess a jewel, of which others are deprived, share it with them in a language of utmost kindness and goodwill. If it be accepted, if it fulfills its purpose, your object is obtained. If anyone should refuse it, leave him unto himself, and beseech God to guide him. Beware lest ye deal unkindly with him. (*Gleanings 132:5*)

The pioneers on the reservations had the challenge of sharing these new teachings about the unity of humankind and the oneness of religion without exhibiting the least bit of condescension, for the American Indians

have historically been victimized by those who employed coercive tactics to convert them to beliefs contrary to their own sophisticated spiritual view of reality. Instead, if they were to succeed in being faithful to their calling, the Bahá'í teachers had to befriend them while at the same time demonstrating complete sincerity, and share their beliefs and concepts in such a way as would not demean or disparage the traditional customs and spiritual susceptibilities of Native Americans (*Bahá'í Faith* 178).

#### NATIVE BAHÁ'Í LITERATURE AND COMMITTEES

The most important piece of training material for the early pioneers to the Native American reservations was a teaching brochure published by the AISC under the auspices of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States between 1952 and 1953. This simple manual was amazingly insightful in its scope and depth of information, containing, as it did, the goals of the National Spiritual Assembly regarding the American Indian Bahá'ís, together with directives from 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Shoghi Effendi in support of those goals. The various sections were devoted to informing those who intended to pioneer on the reservations about a wide range of cultural, legal, and religious topics. It encouraged Bahá'í youth to live on or near reservations, and it classified Indian tribes into what it described as "six main stalks": the Algonquin,

Athapascan, Iroquois, Muskogean, Shoshone, and Sioux nations.

Perhaps the next most important publication assisting Bahá'ís who desired to serve as pioneers among American Indians was a booklet in the Cherokee language (1954), the English version of which was published in 1955 under the title *The New Day*. The Navajo version, *Lahgo 'Áhoot' Éego Hanááhoolzhllzh*, contained an English translation, as did the version for the Oneida, published in 1956.

The AISC's monthly publication of *Talking Leaves* was probably the most important and consistent means of communication and guidance nationwide for Bahá'ís living among the various Indians tribes, whether on reservations or in nearby urban areas. The journal's issues provided information about arriving and departing pioneers, their activities, the response of the Indian peoples, and notices about gatherings and job openings.

After *Talking Leaves* ceased publication in 1960, there began a more formal publication in 1963 directed not to the Bahá'í pioneers, but to Native Bahá'ís themselves. Titled simply *Bahá'í Letter*, this publication was a straightforward and dignified communication whose language was simple, since English was a second language for many of the recipients, and it served as an effective instrument for instructing these new Bahá'ís about the teachings, laws, and institutions of the Bahá'í Faith.

Publication of the newsletter *Flaming Arrow* began in 1974. It, too, was

geared toward informing the American Indian Bahá'ís about such matters as the Nineteen Day Feasts, Bahá'í holy days, Bahá'í marriage laws, and the structure and functioning of the Local Assemblies. In addition to these instructional topics, the newsletter also included information about the various communities and was more inclusive in tone and subject matter. In 1980, the monthly *AITC News* replaced the *Flaming Arrow*. After its creation in Arizona in 1977, the Native American Bahá'í Institute (NABI) took control of all newsletters.

All of the early newsletters, along with other letters, individually produced booklets, pamphlets, and instructional materials, provided an irreplaceable resource for the American Indians who came into the Bahá'í Faith. Other Native-focused events organized throughout the years—Council Fires, Spirit Runs, special gatherings, and committees—are also a part of this history. Eventually, the AISC became the American Indian Teaching Committee (AITC), whose membership included several Native American Bahá'ís. The AITC later developed the Regional American Indian Teaching Committees (RAITCs). In addition, the National American Indian Teaching Committee (NAITC) was formed, although the NAITC and all RAITCs were permanently dissolved by the end of 2000 in order to decentralize teaching efforts and concentrate them instead at the local community level.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>5</sup> In a letter dated 30 May 1997, the Universal House of Justice explains: “The expansion of the Bahá'í community and the

#### A RESISTANCE STORY: “WHY SHOULD WE TEACH THE INDIANS?”

At this point, it is important to note that while teaching without proselytizing is difficult in and of itself, teaching someone from a distinctly different culture requires even more tact, humility, and acquired wisdom. This observation is especially applicable when a Bahá'í is sharing the teachings of the Faith with someone from a culture like that of the Indigenous peoples of North America, who tend to have a highly developed philosophical and spiritual worldview derived from their own religious history, traditions, and practices. Bahá'u'lláh purposefully constructed the Bahá'í Faith to be culturally neutral so as to be accessible to all the peoples of the world. Its teachers must become extremely attentive to the manner in which the Faith is shared so that no hint of cultural superiority or bias taints their efforts and so that no specific cultural perspective somehow becomes intertwined with the teachings themselves.

So it was that in the early spring of 1996, the newly-created RAITC for Kansas, Iowa, Nebraska, and Missouri was formed, with one appointee from

---

growing complexity of the issues which are facing National Spiritual Assemblies in certain countries have brought the Cause to a new stage in its development. They have caused us in recent years to examine various aspects of the balance between centralization and decentralization.”

Kansas, one from Iowa, two from Nebraska, and two from Missouri. As one of those picked for this path of service, I will now describe my personal experience on this committee to offer a concrete example of the challenges we encountered in the course of some Bahá'í efforts at community building between Natives and non-Natives.

Our RAITC was mandated by the National Teaching Committee to educate our respective Bahá'í communities on *why* it was important to teach American Indians. Consequently, we sought out and created opportunities to give presentations—in private homes with groups of Bahá'ís, at summer and winter schools, and at Bahá'í conferences—about the value of bringing American Indians into the Faith.

During the years in which we served in this capacity (1996–2000), our committee found three common sources of resistance from the Bahá'í communities in regard to teaching American Indians. The first source of resistance depended to a great extent on the community's geographical proximity to a reservation: communities closer to reservations were obviously more aware of the importance of teaching Native peoples. Though these Bahá'ís knew of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement regarding the importance of teaching Native peoples, many still questioned why they should they teach the Indians instead of focusing on reaching the African American community, a charge which is viewed in the Bahá'í teachings as equally important.

A second source of resistance had to do with the growing desire among Bahá'í communities to reach out to people of other faiths, inasmuch as Bahá'u'lláh admonishes His followers, "Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship" (*Gleanings* 43:6). Because of this teaching, many Bahá'ís began concentrating their efforts on participating in various interfaith groups. However, unless specifically invited to certain events, American Indians are not represented in most interfaith activities. In my estimation, this failure resulted primarily from the assumption of Bahá'í individuals or communities that they did not have ready access to American Indians, or at least certainly not to the same degree that they had to African Americans or people of other religions or cultures within their communities.

Few of the communities at the time were aware of how many American Indians lived in large urban communities or that American Indian Centers were being established in larger cities. There were no organized plans initiated to interact with Indians in urban Bahá'í communities. One explanation for this failure is that most non-Native Bahá'ís simply did not have any experience in interacting with Native people, the exception being the few resident Native Bahá'ís who were willing to provide guidance and instruction to those whom they trusted. Indeed, understandably, trust is a fundamental issue between Native and non-Native individuals, whether the individuals

are Bahá'í or not. Because of the well-documented history of vitiated promises, trust—especially between Native Americans and Whites—must be earned through consistent interaction over a period of time.

A third common source of resistance we found was the perception that there simply were not any Indians in the vicinity to whom one could bring Bahá'u'lláh's message. As one of the two appointees for Missouri on the RAITC, I found this attitude and belief puzzling and surprising. Being of mixed Indian heritage myself, I had spent years attending Native events in various states. Many of the attendees were full bloods, but many were also mixed-blood individuals like myself who count themselves as Indian.<sup>6</sup> Over time I came to realize that if a person did not physically fit the stereotypical image of what most believe an Indian

should look like, Whites often would not recognize that person as being Indian.

It is in light of this misperception that the phrase “the invisible Indian” came into use. It meant that although American Indians lived and worked among the non-Indian population, they were not “seen,” nor were their distinct cultural perceptions and experiences understood or appreciated:

Indians are America's invisible minority. Unless they left the reservation, they literally did not count until 1890 when the nation began counting all Indians—on the reservation or off—in its decennial census. Indians were not granted American citizenship until 1924. . . . They lack the visibility of other minorities. There are no [urban] Native American neighborhoods, no restaurants catering to Native American cuisine, no Native American grocery stores, and no video stores specializing in Native American movies—although there is no shortage of films about Indians. (Kunerth)

---

6 The typical way for a Native person to introduce oneself is to tell one's lineage, where he or she came from. Briefly, my mixed heritage of provable Cherokee blood comes from my maternal grandfather from Alabama, whose mother was full blood Cherokee, and from a mixed-blood paternal Cherokee grandmother from Tennessee whose parents migrated to Texas. My paternal grandfather was a “half-breed.” Family records indicate he was Southern Cheyenne. He was born in Caddo, Oklahoma, but migrated to Texas, where he met my Cherokee grandmother. He was orphaned and adopted at age five, and his official records proving his Indian heritage are unrecoverable.

The movement and mixing of the human race has produced many people who no longer physically identify closely with their ancestors. Chinese, Mongolians, and Asian Islanders often can pass easily for American Indians; and mixtures of white, red, and black skin tones make it hard to determine what heritage a person may claim. It is



little wonder then that White Bahá'ís in the 1990s did not identify their acquaintances, coworkers, or neighbors as either full blood or mixed-blood American Indian. This is understandable, for as far as the Bahá'ís were concerned—especially in non-reservation states like Missouri—there were no Indians nearby. Consequently, our first job as appointees on the RAITC became one of educating the Bahá'í communities about the Native presence and culture by supporting and encouraging White Bahá'ís to attend powwows, learn what protocols to observe, forge genuine friendships, and find out how to volunteer and be of service.

#### ON FIRE AND CONSUMED WITH LOVE

“On fire and consumed with love” is the only phrase that describes adequately the incredible bonding experience that we RAITC members rapidly developed for each other—a bond and love that continued past the dissolution of the RAITC when the National Spiritual Assembly changed its focus to decentralization. Most of us had never met before, but upon meeting, we became enamored with one another and we all felt the “blazing love” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes that can exist among Bahá'ís:

The foundation of Bahá'u'lláh is love . . . you must have infinite love for each other, each preferring the other before himself. (*Promulgation* 218)

My hope is that through the zeal and ardour of the pure of heart, the darkness of hatred and difference will be entirely abolished, and the light of love and unity shall shine; this world shall become a new world; things material shall become the mirror of the divine; human hearts shall meet and embrace each other. (*‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London* 38)

Shoghi Effendi, too, speaks of this communal love:

If the friends will forget all personal differences and open their hearts to a great love for each other for the sake of Bahá'u'lláh, they will find that their powers are vastly increased; they will attract the heart of the public, and will witness a rapid growth of the Holy Faith. (*Dawn* 116)

Turn to your Bahá'í brothers and sisters, who are living with you in the kingdom. Indeed, the believers have not yet fully learned to draw on each other's love for strength and consolation in time of need. The Cause of God is endowed with tremendous powers, and the reason the believers do not gain more from it is because they have not learned to duly draw these mighty forces of love and strength and harmony generated by the Faith. (*Directives* 24)

Without the spirit of real love for

Bahá'u'lláh, for His Faith and its Institutions, *and the believers for each other*, the Cause can never really bring in large numbers of people. For it is not preaching and rules the world wants, but love and action. (*Directives* 40; emphasis added)

We appointees developed a unified, loving friendship of a caliber that cannot be adequately expressed in words, and it was this love and commitment to each other and to our task that was essential in leading us to success in teaching and service with our RAITC activities.

#### VIGNETTES ABOUT SERVICE

##### IOWA: THROUGH FRIENDSHIP

Iowa, although home to the Dakota Sioux, the Ioway, the Illini, the Otoes, and some of the Missouria, has only one federally recognized reservation, that of the Sac and Fox Tribe of the Mississippi, also known as the Mesquakie. The Iowa appointee, Marda Rast, was especially adept at serving the University of Iowa American Indian Student Association (AISA) in Iowa City, volunteering to be of service to the students and faculty who organized and held their yearly powwow.

For American Indians, powwows are highly anticipated social events that bring families together in a culturally empowered environment. The powwow provides a safe place for Indian youth to meet, to display their skills

as dancers, and often to find future spouses. Indian vendors sell their art, clothing (regalia), crafts, and traditional foods to each other and to the public. This is also the space for traditional Giveaways, in which certain families will honor others with gifts that took all year to plan and prepare—perhaps to remember a loved one who has “crossed over,” or to celebrate one who has been selected as a lead dancer.

Hosting powwows takes an enormous amount of time, energy, and volunteer commitments from one year to the next. To be valued by the University of Iowa AISA the way Marda was is no small feat. Her integrity as a White person on whom the Association could count to help with their powwows led to ongoing friendships with Indian families throughout Iowa, especially in the small, tightly knit community of the Mesquakie who did not take readily to outsiders.

##### NEBRASKA AND THE OMAHA

Nebraska holds federally recognized reservation lands for the Omaha Tribe, the Ponca, the Ioway of Kansas and Nebraska, the Santee Sioux Tribe of the Santee Reservation in Nebraska, the Sac and Fox Nation of Missouri in Kansas and Nebraska, and the Winnebago. Shahrokh Roohi and Phyllis Sheridan were the two appointees for Nebraska. Phyllis is a full blood Omaha Indian who lives on the Omaha Reservation in Macy. Shahrokh, a Persian believer, moved with his family to the small town of Lyons near

the reservation. Shahrokh—who was lovingly given the nickname of “the Shah” by the Omaha Indians, whom he served as a health educator and diabetes program director on the reservation—opened his home to RAITC meetings and to a steady stream of Bahá'í traveling visitors. Most of these visitors understood and accepted the “Indian protocols” that provided guidance on social interactions with Native people, especially on reservations.<sup>7</sup>

The Nebraska appointees opened Lyons to its first Bahá'í gathering, which brought over a hundred individuals together in this small town, including National Assembly member and Native American Jacqueline Left Hand Bull. In addition, because of the genuine love and respect shown to the Omaha Indians, in July 1996 the local Bahá'ís, supported by our RAITC members, were given the special honor of hosting the closing ceremonial dinner for the Omaha's resurrected Sun Dance. A good number of Indian Bahá'ís participated in the Sun Dance and White Bahá'ís traveled from several states away to willingly serve in various capacities for the four-day event.

Countless acts of community building took place over the four years of RAITC activity. Both Lyons and the reservation town of Macy observed this outpouring of love, interaction,

and collaboration between the Omaha Indians and the non-Native Bahá'ís.

### *Grandmother Lucy Dick*

One day, when Shahrokh was in Macy's Senior Center getting acquainted with the elders, he noticed a silver-haired person whom he had not met before. Sitting down beside her, he started a conversation and happened to mention that he was a Bahá'í. In turn, the Elder<sup>8</sup>—Grandmother Lucy Dick, whose brother had revived the Omaha Sun Dance—turned complacently to Shahrokh and said in a matter-of-fact voice, “I'm a Bahá'í, too.” Shahrokh, taken by surprise, said to Grandmother Lucy, “Where have you been?” She, in her wise and humorous way, replied, “I've been here all along. Where have *you* been?”

Where indeed! This is a common response among many Natives who became Bahá'í during earlier teaching efforts in the 1960s and 1970s and who still identify themselves as such even though they may not have had contact with other Bahá'ís in a number of years. After she became reacquainted with the Bahá'í community, Grandmother Lucy became an important, active, and dearly beloved friend to all. She supported the RAITC events, encouraged her relatives to attend them, and traveled to the events herself, even though she was in her seventies and used a wheelchair.

---

7 “Protocols for American Indian Teaching.” Compiled by National American Indian Teaching Committee. March 1999.

---

8 The capitalized “Elder” designates a position of wisdom, authority, and service to the Indian community in which he or she resides.

*Restoring a Legacy of Love*

The RAITC helped to organize the building of a small Bahá'í Center on a homestead plot of land in the heart of Macy that had been donated decades earlier to the Omaha Bahá'ís by Macy's first pioneer, Edna Atkins. Clean-up days were organized, trees trimmed, grasses mowed, and ditches cleaned out. The land was leveled and a small road repaired, and a new "Bahá'í Center" sign was painted by a mixed-blood Apache believer. Bahá'í Feasts, Holy Day events, devotional gatherings, and children's classes were organized by the local Omaha Bahá'ís and held in this one-room Bahá'í Center. Importantly, these events involved cooperation and support from the local pioneers to the reservation and from Bahá'ís who traveled to Macy from the RAITC's other three states. Persian, White, African American, and Indian believers from Illinois, Oklahoma, and Arizona also came to support the activities at Macy. Some of these Bahá'í friends have maintained their help and support to the Omaha Bahá'ís throughout the years.

In 1998, the Omaha Bahá'ís and the non-Native Bahá'ís organized a large event at the Center to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Macy. The picture of that first all-Native Spiritual Assembly sat for years on Shoghi Effendi's desk and now hangs in the Mansion at Bahji.<sup>9</sup> Several Omaha Indian Bahá'ís,

descendants of the members of that first, historic Assembly, lived on the reservation and continued annually to elect their Local Spiritual Assembly with the help of pioneers and other believers from Sioux City and Omaha.

## KANSAS: THROUGH SERVICE

Kansas is home to the federally recognized reservations of the Kickapoo, the Iowa, the Prairie Band of Potawatomi Nation, and the Sac and Fox. A Persian believer, Mahin Stanley, represented Kansas on the RAITC. Refusing to be limited by her hearing loss and with the full support of her ill, non-Bahá'í husband, she was volunteering at the vital Head Start Program on the Prairie Band Reservation at the time of her appointment. Mahin had earned the respect of the mothers and teachers in the program, and, as such, she was recognized and warmly welcomed onto the reservation. After her appointment, with the permission of her Indian friends, she took an additional member of the RAITC onto the reservation with her in order to establish another Bahá'í presence and friendship. This kind of endorsement from a trusted non-Native friend is highly regarded and may be the typical way that non-Natives are introduced into the inner Native circles—through an established friendship and the courtesy of asking permission.

---

issue. The "Mansion at Bahji" refers to the last residence of Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892). The burial place of Bahá'u'lláh is on these same grounds beside the mansion.

<sup>9</sup> The same picture is included in this

Mahin traveled with the rest of the RAITC members to Bahá'í events in other states, fully supporting the RAITC meetings and plans and using her quiet wisdom and guidance as a registered social worker to enhance our consultations. Mahin and her husband's sacrifices of home, health, and comfort were constant reminders to all who knew them that service to others is the bedrock of Bahá'í life. Their efforts were also a prime example of the way that Bahá'u'lláh intends all Bahá'ís to undertake teaching and assisting the communities in which they live.

#### MISSOURI: THROUGH VOLITION AND ACTION

Missouri has no federally recognized reservations, although it does have three federally recognized American Indian Centers. The Heart of America Indian Center in Kansas City serves approximately seven thousand families from all Indian nations and tribes in the Greater Kansas City area. In St. Louis, the American Indian Center of Mid-America serves approximately five thousand families, and the Southwest Missouri Indian Center located in Springfield serves twenty-seven counties. Missouri—named after the Missouri Tribe (People of the Big Canoe), a branch of the Sioux Nation—was the sacred hunting grounds of the Osage from Oklahoma. Other tribes also came to Missouri from the Plains, leaving abundant artifacts and archeological sites strewn across the state.

The oldest site of permanent dwellings in the United States dates back twelve thousand years and is located alongside the Missouri River near the state capital. Missouri's museums are full of the state's Indian history, all the way back to the Hopewell Indians circa the Woodlands era. Powwows abound on university and college campuses, in small towns and large cities, and are well attended, bringing in Native dancers and vendors from reservation states and territories. Indian-themed "trading posts," which are filled with dance and ceremonial instruments, Native artwork, locally raised buffalo meat, and the paraphernalia necessary to create beaded items, are common.

Perhaps for those Bahá'ís who had not fully appreciated the ample presence of Native peoples in their midst, all of this was indicative of an ancient history and was possibly not relevant to their present-day charge to make all peoples aware of the advent of Bahá'u'lláh and the Bahá'í teachings. Doubtless, this naive assumption exemplifies the social stereotype of the "invisible Indian."

In this context, we can appreciate that to teach the Bahá'í principles to peoples of diverse cultures, it is first necessary to become attuned to the perspective of those whom one proposes to teach, to first befriend them with sincerity and without ulterior motive. For certainly as we become ever more mindful of those "others" in our midst, we come to realize that everyone with whom we establish an authentic relationship has much to teach

us. As Bahá'u'lláh affirmed, we must be observant about those with whom we wish to share this vital information, and become “anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in, and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements” (*Gleanings* 106:1). Perhaps proactively providing American Indians with access to the elixir of the Bahá'í Writings is a powerful example of how we can be anxiously concerned for the age in which we live.

### *Necessary Knowledge*

As the two members of the RAITC for Missouri, Clay Schiefelbein and I began our task of presenting to Bahá'í communities the importance of teaching American Indians by reiterating and studying with them 'Abdu'l-Bahá's promise to the Indians. To help accomplish this task, we used traditional Native tools such as the talking circle, an arrangement wherein all are allowed to voice their thoughts and concerns without fear of crosstalk, censorship, criticism, or judgment so that true sharing can happen in an atmosphere of trusted confidentiality.

We shared with the non-Native Bahá'ís that the rudest behavior in the American Indian world is to interrupt another's conversation—a behavior for which our Western culture is notorious. For Native people, interruption exemplifies arrogance and a lack of respect for what is being said.<sup>10</sup> We

explained how important it is to listen sincerely when a Native person talks, and we explained that Native people intuitively detect if one is not being sincere because they have had centuries of experience in learning when non-Indians are being duplicitous.

In addition to these general courtesies, which should adorn consultation in general, we also explained some more particular Native norms. For example, we noted that according to some tribal customs, direct eye contact should not be made, and that this tradition has nothing to do with lack of forthrightness or being open. In addition, some Native peoples consider it polite to speak in low tones of voice when in groups of people, and to wait patiently until all others have spoken.

Because of their adherence to these norms, Native Bahá'ís might often lose their chance to speak or share in Assembly meetings dominated by those anxious to get things done or those who are so acculturated to Western social practices that they speak rapidly, moving quickly from subject to subject, or—in spite of Bahá'í guidance to the contrary—interrupt one another. Above all else, we shared with our non-Native Bahá'í friends how crucial it is to keep one's word with Indian

---

guidance in the Bahá'í Writings about how all consultation should take place. In short, this sort of frank, candid, and courteous discourse is the hallmark of how Bahá'ís are supposed to resolve problems and create plans within the family or the community.

---

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted here that all of these qualities are identical with the



friends and not to make idle or casual promises or commitments that cannot be honored.

Of course, these same behaviors resonate with and are parallel to how our Bahá'í Assembly meetings are supposed to be conducted. Consequently, Bahá'ís worldwide are familiar with most of these guidelines, whether one is Native or not. However, because such simple courtesies seem to have gotten lost in the melee of the wider culture, it is not uncommon for non-Native Bahá'ís to take on the frenetic tenor of Western culture in the course of consultation. While it may cause mild discomfiture among non-Native Bahá'ís, trying to adapt their rhetorical delivery so that it is respectful to Native Bahá'ís is essential to maintaining Bahá'í communities on reservations.<sup>11</sup>

### *Volition and Determination*

As our team of two in Missouri worked through the doubts and concerns of the predominantly White Bahá'í community, we gradually found acceptance, understanding, and renewed enthusiasm about reaching out to American Indians. Local teaching plans began to include an emphasis on trying to identify and reach Native

individuals of full or mixed blood whom they wished to approach with Bahá'u'lláh's central message that unity in diversity is required to create a global community. We stressed that genuine friendship is highly regarded among the Native people and that they would be inspired to teach others if Bahá'í teachers were careful not to be judgmental and were focused on listening to those to whom they brought this vital message.

We gave presentations at Bahá'í schools and conferences throughout the four states, bringing to these venues some useful traditions of Native culture, such as drumming and even the sharing of a sacred pipe by Bahá'í Indian friends. Because most of the non-Native Bahá'ís had never before been exposed to these basic aspects of Native culture, valid questions arose regarding rituals versus ceremonies, inasmuch as the Bahá'í Faith is quite purposefully devoid of rituals. Likewise, some concerns were discussed about traditional beliefs that some might consider superstitions, something else Bahá'u'lláh forbids.

The importance of these questions required all of us to examine carefully the Bahá'í Writings on these subjects, especially the relevant letters from the Universal House of Justice. And while satisfactory answers to most of the questions were found, a number of the same questions continue to arise today in regard to Native traditions and ceremonies in the context of the non-ritualistic nature of the Bahá'í Faith.

---

11 See John E. Kolstoe, *Consultation, A Universal Lamp of Guidance*, especially pp. 8–9, and Judie Bopp, Michael Bopp, Lee Brown, and Phil Lane, *The Sacred Tree: Reflections on Native American Spirituality*, especially p. 78.

*Action*

With a mandate to create a state event, our RAITC organized the Heart of America Spiritual Gathering (1996–1999), which was held at the Bahá'í-owned Temerity Woods Retreat near Rolla, Missouri. The purpose of this epic four-day gathering<sup>12</sup> was to bring non-Bahá'í Indians and non-Indian Bahá'ís together in an atmosphere of physical, emotional, and spiritual “safety,” with the express goal of sharing and learning from one another’s culture. Although a direct spinoff from the well-known Gathering of Eagles, founded decades ago by a Native believer, in which teaching the Faith remains individual and indirect, the Heart of America Gathering visibly placed the Faith at the center of its activities.

Held each fall in September, the Gathering annually garnered up to one hundred participants from reservations and towns across the United States. Activities included presentations, traditional drumming and music, dawn prayers, storytelling, and the “Sacred Fire,” over which numerous friendships were forged and at which some attendees declared their intention to become Bahá'ís. Additionally, people could spend time at sweat

---

12 People typically arrived early and left late, so the Gathering actually ran a week or more in length. Some participants stayed on for months, renting one of the cabins and becoming immersed in the local Bahá'í community.

lodges, witness the building of a medicine wheel, eat a traditional meal prepared by the Omaha believers, and participate in a traditional Giveaway at the end of each Gathering.

Youth came from St. Louis to help prepare and serve the meals. Thirteen Native and non-Native individuals decided to join the Bahá'í Faith over the course of four years, and many long-lasting relationships were formed. Traditional adoption and naming ceremonies took place, and one traditional marriage occurred on the retreat grounds. In addition, three other gatherings modeled on the Heart of America Spiritual Gathering were organized in Bismarck, North Dakota, on the Omaha Reservation in Nebraska, and near Stone Mountain in Georgia. The Heart of America Spiritual Gathering, held annually and organized by other Baha'is after the dissolution of the RAITC, ended in 2008.

One derivative of the Gathering was the organization of “The Nunavut Project: A Journey to the Arctic’s Peoples.” This travel-teaching project teamed up ten participants from the Gathering to go to Nunavut, Canada, a self-governing territory of the Inuit. Its purpose was to fulfill the directives from the Universal House of Justice in its Ridván 153 Message to “travel to the circumpolar regions” and to “seize the moment.”<sup>13</sup> This project ran

---

13 Universal House of Justice, Ridván 153 Message (April 1996): “May you all arise to seize the tasks of this crucial moment. May each inscribe his or her

from 2000 to 2008 and involved four separate trips, beginning in 2004, by different team members to Nunavut, each giving presentations in businesses, schools, cultural centers, nursing homes, women's shelters, and a youth detention center. Exemplifying the principle of unity in diversity that characterizes the Bahá'í community worldwide, teams were composed of White, Black, and Native believers. Funds were raised from Local Spiritual Assemblies and individuals supporting the project, which itself took place under the guidance of Nunavut's first Regional Teaching Committee (RTC).

EXPERIENTIAL REFLECTION:  
THEN AND NOW

Arising to serve, as the members of all the RAITCs did, might be likened to one small stone being dropped into still water. Its effect propagates through ever-widening circles of energy that are potentially all-encompassing and ceaseless. Please note that this historical accounting does not concern just one RAITC and its members' experiences. Multiply our experiences by the hundreds of other RAITCs' experiences, and then multiply that by the thousands of experiences gained over numerous decades through the efforts of non-Native believers on and off the reservations. Add in all the knowledge gained by the various Indian teaching

---

own mark on a brief span of time so charged with potentialities and hope for all humanity...."

committees and the support materials they created throughout the years. Finally, add all the experiential lessons shared by the Native believers. Reflecting on all these "ripple effects" will disclose an intricate collage of widespread, deep, meaningful, and consistent Bahá'í teaching work within the American Indian community spanning decades.

It may not be readily apparent to the larger Bahá'í community, but the Indigenous teaching work of Bahá'ís over the past decades has had, and will continue to have, a lasting impact on the future of this most vital relationship within the North American Bahá'í community, unleashing over time the barely tapped influence of these deeply spiritual peoples. I am moved with profound gratefulness, appreciation, and awe for the massive amount of sacrifice and work, effort and struggle, success—and yes, in many instances, failure—experienced by the early pioneers to the reservations; for the embryonic institutes and committees composed of individuals who dared to try their best despite having limited knowledge or training in the Indigenous teaching fields they so willingly entered; and for the courage and audacity it took for the early Native believers to accept and embrace the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh by stepping outside their comfort zones of traditions, customs, culture, and even family.

Still, more is needed. For example, scholarly studies, autobiographies, narratives, and acknowledgements of achievements are needed regarding the

Indigenous Bahá'ís of North America. Recently, a number of authors have published their Bahá'í-themed and Native-related dissertations, theses, and books, but these efforts are a tiny fraction of the sort of research and discourse that needs to take place. After all, there is much to acknowledge. Five American Indians have been elected by the entire United States Bahá'í community to serve on the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States: Franklin Kahn, Chester Kahn, Kevin Locke, Patricia Locke, and Jacqueline Left Hand Bull. Patricia Locke,<sup>14</sup> the first Native American woman to be elected to this body, was the winner of a 1991 MacArthur Fellowship for her lifelong work to preserve Indigenous North American languages. In 2011 a moving biography of the life of the first Native Bahá'ís in Canada was published: Evelyn Loft Watts and Patricia Vergé's *Return to Tyendinaga: The Story of Jim and Melba Loft*. Similarly, First Nations Bahá'ís have served on the Canadian National Spiritual Assembly.

But there is so much more that can be done—that needs to be done—by way of spreading abroad accounts of the sacrificial efforts of the early Bahá'í pioneers who taught the Native peoples, as well as histories of the contributions made by the Indigenous peoples to the Bahá'í community of North America. Their stories need to be told and shared.

#### ARISE WITH DESIRE

The Nunavut Project produced the action booklet *Arise in His Name*, which was based on Shoghi Effendi's "Five Steps of Prayer" and designed to allow individuals to identify and achieve their own personal teaching goals. On the one hand, arising requires the simple act of self-determination, but it implies more—it cannot stop there if the effort is to be fruitful. Shoghi Effendi states, "Have determination to carry the decision through. Many fail here. The decision, budding into determination, is blighted and instead becomes a wish or vague longing. When determination is born, immediately take the next step" (qtd. in *Bahá'í Prayers* 126–27).

Bahá'u'lláh Himself said, "Whoso ariseth to teach Our Cause must needs detach himself from all earthly things, and regard, at all times, the triumph of Our Faith as his supreme objective" (*Gleanings* 157:2). When speaking to an audience in London, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stated His desire that we all become spiritual warriors: "I pray for all of you, that you may become celestial warriors, that you may everywhere spread the Unity of God and enlighten the East and West, and that you may give to all hearts the love of God. This is my utmost desire, and I pray to God that your desire may be the same" (*'Abdu'l-Bahá in London* 46).

Finally, I am reminded of a visit to a First Nations believer's home near Winnipeg, Manitoba, who had just become a Bahá'í along with his

---

14 Her picture is included in this issue.

non-Native wife. Their home was across the border from Bismarck, where one of the Gatherings had just ended. Although it entailed a long drive, the new believers asked us to accompany them to their home for their first Nineteen Day Feast<sup>15</sup> that evening. After we had settled into the Feast, the husband's older brother arrived unexpectedly. The new believer happily told his brother that he had become a Bahá'í that day. His brother, nonplussed at this news, said, "Yes, I became a Bahá'í twenty years ago—and I've not seen a Bahá'í since!" However, in all those years the older brother had never mentioned the Faith to his younger brother. It was such a surprise—such a happy occasion, and yet also quite sad.

It is a point worth noting that hundreds of Indigenous people accepted the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith during the sixties and seventies on reservation and reserves. Through no fault of their own, at the time there was not an adequate and systematic process in place for consolidating these communities. Fortunately, over the past twenty years "the institute

---

15 Bahá'ís hold a community gathering the first day of each month, according to the Bahá'í calendar, which consists of nineteen months of nineteen days each. These are called "Feasts" and consist of prayers and readings from the Bahá'í Scriptures, followed by administrative reports and consultation, and concluding with social activities and the sharing of food.

process"<sup>16</sup> has been developed under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice as a framework for action. Now we have the knowledge and the tools of Ruhi. We also have the essential historical record of experiences to reflect upon, meditate upon, and provide us with another form of guidance for reaching Indigenous peoples in every corner of "Turtle Island"—North America. Never again need the fire of passionate response to the message of Bahá'u'lláh flicker and die because of a lack of human resources or a workable plan for building community life.

---

16 According to the Ridván 153 Message given by the Universal House of Justice, "Training institutes and other centers of learning are an indispensable element of a sustained endeavor to advance this process, and to ensure that the essential deepening of new believers is not neglected, that they develop the necessary skills to effectively teach the Faith, and that an opportunity is provided for all Bahá'ís, new and veteran, to embark on a systematic study of the fundamental verities of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh."

WORKS CITED

- ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London*. London: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. Ed. Howard MacNutt. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982. Print.
- ‘Áhoot’ Éego *Hanááhoolzhllzh*. American Indian Service/Teaching Committee Records, Publications and Regional Files, Box 1, Mss. Collection No: M-476/18/23/31, 1956. Wilmette, IL: National Bahá’í Archives.
- Bahá’í Prayers and Selected Holy Writings: A Compilation*. 6<sup>th</sup> ed. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 2007. Print.
- Bahá’u’lláh. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*. Trans. Shoghi Effendi. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1983. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*. Haifa, Israel: The Universal House of Justice, 1992. Print.
- Bopp, Judie, Michael Bopp, Lee Brown, and Phil Lane. *The Sacred Tree: Reflections on Native American Spirituality*. 2nd ed. Lethbridge, AB: Four Worlds Development Press, 1985. Print.
- The Compilation of Compilations*. Vol. 1. Ed. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, 1963–1990. Maryborough, Australia: Bahá’í Publications Australia, 1991. Print.
- Covey, Linda S. “Diné Becoming Bahá’í: Through the Lens of Ancient Prophecies.” MA thesis. Missouri State University, 2011. Print.
- Hatcher, William S., and J. Douglas Martin. *The Bahá’í Faith: The Emerging Global World Religion*. 4th ed. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 2002. Print.
- Kolstoe, John E. *Consultation, A Universal Lamp of Guidance*. 2nd ed. Oxford: George Ronald, 1988. Print.
- Kunerth, Jeff. “American Indians Remain Invisible Minority.” *The Orlando Sentinel*. Orlando Sentinel, 23 December 1993. Web. 6 June 2016.
- Lights of Guidance*. 4th ed. Ed. Helen Bassett Hornby. New Delhi: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1994. Print.
- Phillips, Nancy. *Bahá’í News* 377.10–12 (August 1962). Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Talking Leaves*. AISC. Wilmette, IL: National Bahá’í Library. (12 November 1959).
- Protocols for American Indian Teaching*. Ed. National American Indian Teaching Committee. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1999. Print.
- Rabbani, Rúhíyyih. *A Manual for Pioneers*. New Delhi, India: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1981. Print.
- \_\_\_\_\_. “A Message to the Indian and Eskimo Bahá’ís of the Western Hemisphere.” Houck, AZ: Native American Bahá’í Institute, 2002. Print.
- Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel of Faith: Messages to America 1947–1957*. 5th ed. Wilmette, IL: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1997. Print.



\_\_\_\_\_. *Dawn of a New Day: Messages to India 1923–1957*. New Delhi, India: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970. Print.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Directives from the Guardian*. New Delhi, India: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. Print.

Starr, Rita. "Healing Our Nation: Where Overcoming Prejudice Frees Your Mind and Comforts Your Heart." *Healing Our Nation*. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 July 2016.

Teaching Brochure of the American Indian Service Committee. American Indian Service/Teaching Committee Records, Publications and Regional Conference Files, Collection no. M-476/18/23/3. Wilmette, IL: National Bahá'í Archives.

The Universal House of Justice. Letter to the National Spiritual Assemblies. 30 May 1997.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Promoting Entry by Troops." *Compilation of Compilations*. Ed. Bahá'u'lláh et al. Vol. 3. Mona Vale: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 2000. 154–202. Print.

\_\_\_\_\_. Letter to the Bahá'ís of the World. Ridván 153 Message. April 1996.



Hand of the Cause Dhikru'llah Khadem and Bahá'ís from 34 Native American tribes at Great Council Fire in Arizona, February 1963.

(Photo courtesy of National Bahá'í Archives, United States)

# Building Intercultural Community: Insights from Indigenous Bahá'í History

CHELSEA HORTON

## *Abstract*

Drawing on interviews with Indigenous Bahá'ís from diverse backgrounds in Canada and the United States, this article explores efforts and experiences of intercultural Bahá'í community building dating from the 1960s through the early 1990s. At a time when colonial policies and attitudes remained ripe in North America at large, the Bahá'í Faith was a site of intercultural learning and exchange through which Indigenous and non-Indigenous adherents forged striking relationships of mutual respect. Building Bahá'í community in the decades considered here, however, was neither easy nor automatic and was especially fraught for Indigenous adherents, who also confronted tensions of intercultural communication and understanding and sometimes outright racism. Implementing unity in diversity is a gradual process that continues to be worked out in particular contexts over time. This process itself reveals the Bahá'í religion's role as a rich space of intercultural contact and community building.

## *Resumé*

À partir d'entrevues menées avec des bahá'ís s autochtones de divers milieux

au Canada et aux États Unis, l'auteur se penche sur les efforts déployés et l'expérience acquise en matière de développement communautaire interculturel bahá'í dans les années 1960 jusqu'au début des années 1990. À une époque où les politiques et les attitudes coloniales demeuraient très présentes dans l'ensemble de l'Amérique du Nord, la foi bahá'íe était un lieu d'apprentissage et d'échanges interculturels où les bahá'ís autochtones et non autochtones ont forgé des relations remarquables de respect mutuel. Cependant, bâtir une communauté bahá'íe au cours des décennies examinées n'a pas été un processus aisé ni automatique, en particulier pour les bahá'ís autochtones qui ont aussi dû faire face à des tensions sur le plan des communications et de la compréhension interculturelles, parfois même à du racisme. Établir l'unité dans la diversité est un processus graduel qui continue d'être mis au point au fil du temps dans des contextes particuliers. Le processus lui même met en lumière le rôle de la religion bahá'íe en tant que lieu propice aux relations et au développement communautaire interculturels.

## *Resumen*

Recurriendo a entrevistas con bahá'ís indígenas de diversos trasfondos en Canadá y los Estados Unidos, este artículo explora los esfuerzos y las experiencias de la construcción de comunidad bahá'í intercultural datando desde los 1960s hasta los años tempranos de los 1990s. En un tiempo cuando las políticas y actitudes coloniales permanecían fuertes en Norteamérica en general, la Fe Bahá'í era un sitio de aprendizaje e intercambio intercultural a través de la cual adherentes indígenas y no-indígenas forjaban relaciones impresionantes de respeto mutuo. Construyen-

do comunidad bahá'í en las décadas aquí consideradas, sin embargo, no fue fácil ni automático y estuvo especialmente lleno de tensión para los adherentes indígenas quienes también confrontaron tensiones interculturales de comunicación y comprensión y a veces de racismo flagrante. Implementando la unidad en diversidad es un proceso gradual que se continúa trabajado en contextos específicos a través del tiempo. Este proceso en sí revela el rol de la religión bahá'í como un espacio rico de contacto intercultural y de construcción de comunidad.

“That was my big eye opener,” Tlingit Bahá'í Joyce Shales recalled, describing the international Bahá'í conference she attended with her father in Palermo, Sicily, in the summer of 1968. “I met people from Africa,” she continued, “from everywhere in the world. So it was like this was the epitome of everything that I thought I believed, and now there it was, right at your feet. And it was the real beginning of the Bahá'í Faith as a global religion for me.”

As a Bahá'í, Shales developed a global spiritual geography that, to paraphrase Bahá'u'lláh, viewed the earth as one country and humanity its citizens. Like other adherents, Shales activated this vision, as well as an attendant sense of world citizenship, through travel and attendance at transnational Bahá'í gatherings. And as sociological studies of the contemporary Bahá'í community have signaled, she and other Bahá'ís further forged “situated universalist” identities by working to build Bahá'u'lláh's promised “New

World Order” at home (McMullen 12; Echevarria; Warburg).

Bahá'ís are charged, as a core matter of the Faith, to build community with other adherents. Where existing literature on Bahá'í community building has stressed the role of Bahá'í institutions and considered their operation in specific contexts, I focus in this article on interactions between adherents themselves and the Bahá'í community as a broader space of intercultural interaction. More specifically, I draw on interviews with Indigenous Bahá'ís to examine efforts and experiences of intercultural Bahá'í community building dating from the 1960s through the early 1990s.

This article is derived from a wider study that considers how and why Indigenous people from diverse backgrounds in Canada and the United States joined the Bahá'í religion and practiced their faith during the second half of the twentieth century (Horton). This larger study, like this article, is based on interviews with Indigenous Bahá'ís from both urban and reserve/reservation environments stretching from Alaska to Alberta to Arizona and locations beyond and in between. Most of those whom I interviewed became Bahá'ís between the mid-1960s and the early 1980s. A number were raised with a strong sense of Indigenous identity, while they were also racialized as Indians. Others grew up disconnected from their Indigenous heritage and a few first came to openly identify as Indigenous by way of Bahá'í observance itself. I come to this

study as a scholar of settler heritage who is not a member of the Bahá'í Faith. I offer the analysis that follows in a spirit of respect and dialogue.

The core Bahá'í teaching of unity in diversity was a strong motivational factor for Indigenous people who joined the religion in the decades examined here and their subsequent “deepening” in the Faith. Bahá'ís, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, came and continue to come together for regular worship and celebration and for administrative functions, teaching, and service projects. Encouraged to “live the Bahá'í life” in the everyday, many also cultivated relationships that extended beyond explicitly Bahá'í spaces or activities (Shoghi Effendi, qtd. in *Compilation* 1–28).

At a time when colonial policies and attitudes remained prevalent in North America at large, the Bahá'í Faith was a site of intercultural learning and exchange through which Indigenous and non-Indigenous adherents forged profound relationships of mutual respect. Building the Bahá'í community between the 1960s and the early 1990s, however, was neither easy nor automatic, and it was especially fraught for Indigenous adherents, who also confronted tensions of intercultural communication and understanding—and sometimes even outright racism. As articulated in the Bahá'í Writings and borne out in ongoing community practice, implementing unity in diversity is a gradual process. Other articles in this collection reflect on more recent efforts to build Indigenous-Bahá'í

relationships, informed by currents and experiences like those considered here.

Participation in the Bahá'í community frequently brought Indigenous adherents into a form of close intercultural interaction many had not experienced before. While Shales, for example, stressed how her global travels opened up what the religious studies scholars Manuel Vásquez and Marie Marquardt have called an expanded “cartography of belonging,” she likewise emphasized how engagement in the Bahá'í community back home in Alaska involved a new form of “mixing” altogether (53). As she recalled of her entry into the Bahá'í community in the mid-1960s:

when I became Bahá'í, I can tell you that from the background I came from, I came from a small Alaskan town [Sitka] that I had never left, except maybe I traveled to Seattle once or twice with my family. Coming to the States was like coming to a foreign country. So I went away to the University of Alaska [in Fairbanks, in the Alaskan interior], got married, had one son, and then became Bahá'í. Okay. Never been around White people socially to speak of. That was a shock. Most of the people I've been around are my family, except for at school or having to do with some administrative organization of some sort. I worked in a hospital after high school and I really enjoyed

my work. It was there that I had my first real interaction with the non-Native community in my hometown.

Coming into the Bahá'í community further extended such "real" interaction. Drawing on the metaphor of mixing, Shales explained that "when I became Bahá'í I got mixed in with a bunch of people that I had never been mixed in with before. A whole new different kind of a group." She contrasted this experience with her upbringing in the Presbyterian Church: "Even when I had gone to church," she continued, "you don't mix in with people like you do in the Bahá'í community; it's a whole different thing. When you go to church, you go there on Sunday, you visit a little, and you go home." The Bahá'í Faith, by contrast, brought Shales quite literally into the homes (the gathering places for events such as Bahá'í firesides and Feasts) of her coreligionists.

The novelty of Bahá'í intercultural interaction was not limited to those in remote environments like Alaska. Joining the Bahá'í community, even the act of enrollment itself, presented new dynamics for adherents in urban areas as well. Mary Gubatayao-Hagen, for example, described the acute pain she confronted when she entered an unfamiliar White middle-class suburb in San Jose, California, in order to sign her Bahá'í declaration card in 1981. Gubatayao-Hagen is of Tlingit, Tsimshian, and Filipino heritage and was raised in Washington State. She was

first introduced to the Bahá'í Faith by her mother, Ruby Gubatayao, who encouraged her daughter to formally enroll as a Bahá'í in the local community of San Jose, where she was then living.<sup>1</sup> Gubatayao-Hagen had come of age in a context of urban Indigenous activism in Seattle, a factor, she stressed, that firmly informed her declaration experience. She recalled:

I was pretty radical and revolutionary. I wasn't exactly American Indian Movement—they were very militant—but I think that our family, and especially my mom, was a notch below that. And so for me with all this Indian activism, to have to go to this middle-class White neighbourhood, and I was just praying to Bahá'u'lláh, I said, you know, "Are You testing how much I love You? Are You testing that I believe in You?" Because I knew that Bahá'u'lláh was going to be the healing medicine for our people; I knew that already. And so I'm going, but oh my God, it took all this strength. I mean, I was crying, and I just, every step across the street and up the walk and up on the porch and knocking on the door and going into the house—the whole thing was extremely painful. But I said, you know, I would do this, but as I was crossing that street, I said,

---

1 For context on Ruby Gubatayao see "Ruby Gubatayao Served the Cause Among Native Peoples."



“Bahá’u’lláh, I’m going to do this.” And I said, “But I am going to work my whole life to make sure that other Native people don’t have to go to this extreme, and overcome these kind of hurdles to have access to You.”

Gubatayao-Hagen’s reflections reveal a charged conversion process from Red Power<sup>2</sup> to intercultural Bahá’í community and identify the sorts of structural barriers—social, cultural, and racial—that Indigenous people sometimes confronted as they made such a move. At the same time, her experience illustrates the lasting kinship that such contact could promote. Speaking to a sense of shared genealogy that Bahá’ís often cultivated with their religious teachers and those Bahá’ís in whose company they signed their declaration cards, Gubatayao-Hagen explained that she remains

---

2 “Red Power” refers to a visible, sometimes militant (to use Gubatayao-Hagen’s term) Indigenous activist movement that came into public view in the late 1960s (Johnson, Nagel, and Champagne). On earlier strands of such activism see Cobb and Fowler. Andrea Smith has employed the language of conversion “from Red Power to Christianity” (99). Lorintha Umtuch, who became a Bahá’í on the Yakama Reservation in Washington in 1966, likewise notes the class dimension of her declaration experience, in her case connecting with “poor Indian people from the coast” who had traveled to her reservation to teach the religion.

connected with the non-Indigenous (and, it turned out, prominent Bahá’í) family at whose home she enrolled and feels “really lucky to have them as these very close spiritual mentors in my life.”

Other interviewees likewise recalled formative mentorship they received as early Bahá’ís. Deloria Bighorn, for example, who is of Yankton Sioux and Chickasaw heritage and who is the current chair of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of Canada, spoke with great warmth about two elderly sisters, Dorothy Hayes and Emmalu McCandless, who served as key supports after she declared in Walla Walla, Washington, in the late 1960s. Bahá’í demographics, Bighorn noted, were shifting by generation as well as by race at this time, and youth often met with McCandless for intense spiritual discussion and study. As Bighorn explained, “Her home was always open and the youth were there hanging out and she was just delighted. She treated us all as absolute equals.” Bighorn remained in contact with these women after she moved away from Walla Walla. She recalled being particularly moved when she first introduced McCandless to her husband, Jacob, who was Lakota from Montana:

I remember she said to Jacob—when we first met and married, I wanted Jacob to meet her—and the minute she took his hands in her hands she said, “This boy has been hurt.” And that really touched Jacob’s heart, because



that's really all he wanted anybody to recognize, is that he had been hurt. "This boy has been hurt." She brought him in and she was such an amazing woman.

Bighorn did not specify whether or to what degree Hayes and McCandless were aware of the colonial history that had caused this hurt. But her reflections imply that the heart connections they cultivated worked on an intimate, interpersonal scale to help heal it.

Interviewees pointed to "pioneers,"<sup>3</sup> in particular, as adherents with whom they forged meaningful and lasting bonds. They invariably spoke with great affection about non-Indigenous Bahá'ís who committed themselves to pioneering over the long term. Interviewees recognized that these pioneers voluntarily undertook intercultural teaching and acknowledged the steps these Bahá'ís took to extend themselves beyond their own cultural comfort zones (Umtuch; Locke; Tyler; Healy). Peigan Bahá'í Beverley Knowlton, for example, whose parents joined the religion when she was a young girl, stressed that the pioneers who made regular visits to her reserve in southern Alberta during the 1960s and 70s "came and they didn't take us different. They accepted us." She added that

---

3 "Any believer who arises and leaves his [or her] home to journey to another country [or area] for the purpose of teaching the Cause is a pioneer" (The Universal House of Justice, letter dated 30 March 1971).

"through the years, we had all kinds of Bahá'ís come into our home. And Dale and Joyce [two non-Indigenous Bahá'í women], well I just practically grew up with them."<sup>4</sup> The indelible impact of these relationships was made clear when Knowlton recalled her hesitancy, as a teenager, to join in the Indigenous activism brewing in Edmonton, where she attended high school. Youth in the city, she explained, were "being really racist with White people. And having these protests and all this and I was right in with them. But the thing that always got me is I can never fully join them because I was raised as a Bahá'í. And if I start calling White people down, then that would be just like calling Dale Lillico down and Joyce McGuffie, who were a very big part of my growing up." An unwillingness to partake in what anthropologist James Clifford has described as "exclusivist nativism" did not mean that Knowlton, or other Indigenous Bahá'ís, were apathetic (200). Rather, as her expression of intercultural solidarity signals, Bahá'ís were working to realize their own vision of unity in diversity.

Some Indigenous Bahá'ís—in the Yukon and on the Navajo Reservation, for example—lived in areas with a certain geographic concentration of Indigenous adherents. In the everyday lives of many Indigenous Bahá'ís, however, engagement in the Bahá'í community necessarily meant

---

4 For background on Dale Lillico and Joyce McGuffie see Verge 70-71, 82, 83, 177, 266, 310, 311.

engagement in intercultural community. The relative scarcity and geographical isolation of Indigenous adherents meant that in order to partake in the community, they had to reach out and build intercultural bridges in a way not required of the majority of Bahá'ís.

This process sometimes produced strong relationships. But it also generated strains. Most Bahá'ís did not participate in teaching or pioneering among Indigenous people. When they encountered Indigenous people and practices at Bahá'í gatherings, then, it was likely the first time that they found themselves in any kind of close interaction with Indigenous people. Such interaction, of course, was precisely the sort of thing that the principle of unity in diversity promoted. Yet despite sincere commitment to this teaching, the power that attended—indeed, constituted—difference did not simply evaporate at Bahá'í functions. The result was frequent intercultural miscommunication and misunderstanding and sometimes outright racism. Such difficulties caused a number of Indigenous Bahá'ís to pull back from active community practice, a pattern that in turn exacerbated demographic imbalance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Bahá'ís.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Interviewee Lee Brown noted that many of these people continued to identify as Bahá'ís but became “inactive.” Another interviewee, Phil Lane Jr., described these as “estranged” adherents.

Lack of cultural awareness and sensitivity on the part of non-Indigenous Bahá'ís proved to be a particular point of tension for some Indigenous adherents. Many of those whom I interviewed were first drawn to the Faith by the space that they saw within it for Indigenous ways of knowing and being. The teachings of progressive revelation and cultural preservation that the Bahá'í Faith promoted were profoundly refreshing and inspiring for many Indigenous Bahá'ís, both those who had preexisting ties to Indigenous cultures and others who made these connections by way of their Bahá'í practice (Horton). At the same time, a number of interviewees hinted at having encountered suspicion, fear, and dismissal from non-Indigenous adherents.

Cherokee Bahá'í Lee Brown, for example, spoke pointedly about the profound surprise and disappointment he felt following the first Nineteen Day Feast that he attended after becoming a Bahá'í in Seattle in the 1970s. He described being approached by an elderly White woman, who told him, “Now that you're a Bahá'í, I hope you quit that Indian singing nonsense. It's time to let that go and just be a Bahá'í now.” Brown further detailed his reaction: “I thought, ‘What?’ I thought the whole thing about the Bahá'í Faith was unity in diversity and that our diversity was good. And I'd sang at Bahá'í gatherings and people had said, ‘Oh, that's cool.’ And now it was controversial.” As other scholars have observed, and other interviewees also noted, there

was a particular moment of pushback against such diversity in this period, as significantly more youth and people of colour came into the North American Bahá'í community (Garlington 137–39; Deloria Bighorn; Lane). Tensions were not isolated to this time, however. Anthropologist Carolyn Sawin, for example, has reported conflicts in the Yukon, where non-Indigenous Bahá'ís regularly dismissed Indigenous cultural practice as entertainment, not worship (82–83, 117–20, 169–70, 179). Similarly, writings from the Universal House of Justice that spoke of the incorporation of “colourful characteristics of particular peoples and tribes” and that distinguished “festive and cultural events” from “religious ceremonies and rituals” may have caused Bahá'ís to overlook the spiritual orientation of Indigenous cultures that do not strictly parse the sacred and the secular (Letter dated 26 March 1982).

The same community context and composition that produced pushback against Indigenous cultural practices like drumming and singing also contributed to a normative baseline of Bahá'í practice that some interviewees described as alienating. Bahá'í writings on ritual caution against just this sort of baseline. Not unlike Bahá'í writings that deal with superstition—which enjoin Bahá'ís to eschew empty, fear-based, repetitious form—writings regarding ritual urge Bahá'ís to avoid establishing “rigid rituals” so that local Bahá'í expression may flourish (Hornby 477–78; McMullen 7–8, 76–77). As scholar and former Bahá'í Linda

Walbridge observed in 1995, however, Bahá'ís have historically exhibited anxiety about ritual in a way that has often curbed flexibility in Bahá'í observance. At the same time, Bahá'ís have sometimes failed to recognize how practices that have hardened into established form are themselves a kind of ritual, and a rigid one at that.

The format of the Nineteen Day Feast, for example, has changed over time, but since Shoghi Effendi's ministry, it has been mandated that the Feast, however cultural varied, consist of three components: devotions, administration, and socialization (McMullen 85–87; the Universal House of Justice, qtd. in *Compilation* 420). Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice after him, encouraged flexibility within this broad structure. And yet rigidity still persisted in practice. A 1976 editorial in *Bahá'í Canada*, for example, critiqued what was then an established pattern: “A Feast can only be a Feast if five or six prayers are followed by a ‘consultation’ which is followed by tea and cookies. In spite of the warnings which Shoghi Effendi wrote to us, we keep falling into the groove of conformity” (“The Wide Path of Service: An Editorial” 2).

Such conformity is something that Lee Brown and other Bahá'ís on the Okanagan Indian Reserve strove to address in the 1980s when they held a pipe ceremony as the devotional component of their Feast. As Brown recalled:

for a while we were having Feast on the Vernon reserve, because we had enough Bahá'ís to have a Feast. And the Feast would often be at our house. And what we would do, and we decided to do, was a pipe ceremony. We'd do a pipe ceremony as our prayer section. We'd have the social section and then we'd have the business section [...] And sometimes Bahá'ís from in town would come and participate. And they would say, "Well, this is a pipe ceremony, it's not a Feast."

Articulating a sense of intertribal Bahá'í affiliation, Brown continued:

And I would say, "Well, I heard that on the Navajo Reservation, the Feast is all day long." And here in Vernon, we go into Feast in town, it's an hour long, that's it, bam, you go home. But we sat down as a community and said, "How do we want to do Feast? This is how we want to do it." And it's very clear in the Writings that different people around the world, different places, will do the Feast differently. You know, we wanted to do it that way.

In 1989, the Universal House of Justice explicitly called for the Nineteen Day Feast to incorporate "a salutary diversity, representative of the unique characteristics of the various societies in which it is held and

therefore conducive to the upliftment and enjoyment of its participants" (qtd. in *Compilation* 420). Brown recalled that Bahá'ís in Vernon, however, simply "couldn't get their minds around the fact that it was a Feast."

The place of the pipe ceremony within the Bahá'í Faith became a point of reflection and dialogue within a number of local Bahá'í communities and national administrations in North America. It also drew the attention of international Bahá'í figure Rúhíyyih Khánum. Speaking about a gathering on the Peigan Indian Reserve in southern Alberta in 1986, Brown shared:

I was at a pipe ceremony on the Peigan Reserve in Alberta, at the Bahá'í Centre on the Peigan Reserve, many years ago, and Phil Lane was doing the pipe ceremony during a gathering and there was quite a few Persian Bahá'ís there and others, non-Native Bahá'ís, who were not being respectful, who were talking during the ceremony. And that night Rúhíyyih Khánum, the wife of Shoghi Effendi, was there and she was upset by the disrespect. And she stood up and gave a little talk. And she told the non-Natives there, she pointed at the pipe and she said, "In North America, that's it. You guys have to respect that here. This is an important thing in North America." She actually sent a letter to all the Persian Bahá'ís in the world—every Persian

Bahá'í in the world—saying, “Respect the pipe. When you're present with the pipe, respect it.”<sup>6</sup>

Rúhíyyih Khánum, who had visited the same area and had been given a Blackfoot name nearly twenty-five years earlier and who is remembered by many Bahá'ís, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, as both an ally and a relative, followed this up in October with a letter to the Canadian National Spiritual Assembly.<sup>7</sup> In this meditation on her journey to Canada earlier that year and the ongoing imperative, in view of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prophecy concerning Indigenous peoples, of outreach to Indigenous communities, Rúhíyyih Khánum again chastised Iranian Bahá'ís for the disrespect they

---

6 What Brown was likely remembering here is a letter Rúhíyyih Khánum sent to Canadian Bahá'ís on the subject (Rabbani, letter dated 28 October 1986). An article about this gathering, the opening of the Naat Owa 'Pii (Sacred Things) Bahá'í Centre in Brocket, was published in an area newspaper: “Peigans Open Welcome Baha'i Centre.” Suggesting a shared sense of Indigenous Bahá'í memory and identification, another interviewee, Donald Addison, who was not in attendance at this gathering, also mentioned it in his interview with me (though he put it among the Blackfeet in Montana, not the Blackfoot in Alberta).

7 Rúhíyyih Khánum was given the Blackfoot name “Natu-Okcist,” or “Blessed Mother,” during a visit to the Peigan Reserve in 1960 (Rabbani, Message).

demonstrated toward the pipe ceremony at the Peigan Reserve. Invoking her late husband, she also wrote in this letter, “I remember Shoghi Effendi telling the American pilgrims at the dinner table in the Western Pilgrim House that the American Bahá'ís were tainted with race prejudice; he said ‘they do not think they are, but they are’” (Rabbani, letter dated 28 October 1986). “I think this holds true,” she continued, “also of the whole situation vis-à-vis the Indians in North America” (Rabbani, letter dated 28 October 1986).

While it was White Bahá'ís who set the dominant cultural tone of the Bahá'í community in Canada and the United States, this exchange at the Peigan Reserve underscores how Bahá'í intercultural relations were not a straightforward Indigenous-White issue. There was an Iranian presence in the North American Bahá'í community from the start, something that was significantly amplified with the arrival of relatively large numbers of Bahá'í emigrants in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. This demographic shift sometimes produced new intercultural tensions (Brown; Greenaway; Shales). At the same time, several interviewees also stressed a strong sense of connection that they shared with Iranian Bahá'ís on the basis of common histories of oppression.<sup>8</sup> Further, it is quite possible that

---

8 Lucas; Umtuch; Greenaway. A similar connection was drawn in the 1980 Indigenous Bahá'í teaching pamphlet, Circle

at least some of the Iranian Bahá'ís in attendance at the gathering at the Peigan Reserve were new to Canada and would thus have had little, if any, prior exposure to Indigenous cultural practices such as the pipe ceremony. Their very presence at a gathering on a reserve signals a first step, however shaky, toward intercultural exchange.

Such learning was a two-way process. Joyce Shales, for her part, recalled her surprise when, after an initial honeymoon period during which she felt a strong acceptance and contentedness in the Bahá'í community, “slowly these cross-cultural issues started cropping up.” Though Shales subsequently dedicated much of her personal and professional life to intercultural education, she noted that “I didn’t know anything about cross-cultural issues at that time, I didn’t know what they were. So they were kind of hard for me to understand.” These issues had much to do with communication, with the subtle unspoken cues that structured interaction. Shales, for example, recalled having difficulty understanding why Bahá'ís “wouldn’t wait for me to speak,” as Tlingit precepts of courtesy prescribed. As she elaborated elsewhere, with a characteristic touch of humor:

---

of Unity. Diné Bahá'ís likewise draw a parallel between the Navajo “Long Walk” and Bahá'u'lláh's series of forced migrations across the Middle East (Covey 54). Graeme Were further notes a sense of solidarity shared by Nalik Bahá'ís in New Ireland and Iranian adherents (666).

I used to tell Clint [her husband] it took me ten years before I could look a White person in the eye. Ten years of work. It's just that we never looked people in the eye. That was a teaching. You don't look somebody in the eye, because when you look somebody in the eye, it meant you were angry. So, to then have White people constantly looking you in the eye, and they're walking right up to your face and then staring you in the eye—because some people really do that—was just unnerving. So you have to tell yourself, “They don't mean anything by it, they don't mean anything by it. Even if they back you into the refrigerator, they don't mean anything by it.” So they have no clue, but you're always on the defensive, because you're trying to cope. Any Indian will tell you that. Or any minority, be it Mexican, Black, or whatever. I believe. Because the cultures are different. And it's not just that, it's eye contact and touching and space. And asking questions. And how close you get to somebody when you're talking to them. Like one guy used to back me into the corner all the time, because he'd get so close to me and I'd be backing up. But he'd keep walking forward until I was backed into the fridge, and all the time he'd be asking questions. Never failed. I'd still be backing up, he'd still be yakking away. And asking what would be to us



inappropriate questions. Nothing harmful, just questions we would never ask somebody. Or questions we normally wouldn't ask people. That was cultural. If somebody wanted to tell you something, they'd tell you. That was it.

Speaking to her increased conversance in White communication styles (like the ability to “look a White person in the eye”), Shales added, “So the way I am today is not the way I was. I would say I'm a completely different person now than I was at that time.” She and her family did not sacrifice their sense of being Tlingit upon becoming Bahá'í. And building unity in diversity, as several interviewees stressed, demanded flexibility on all sides (Shales; Gubatayao-Hagen; Greenaway; Covey). Yet in practice, the process demanded something different—indeed, something more—from Indigenous adherents. Non-Indigenous ignorance of Indigenous teachings like the Tlingit interactional patterns Shales described produced a normative baseline of non-Indigenous Bahá'í practice. This meant that it was Indigenous adherents, rather than non-Indigenous ones, who were, more often than not, required to negotiate and cross the cultural color line.

This process proved intensely painful for some Indigenous adherents. Jacob Bighorn, for example, spoke about the early enthusiasm that he brought to his employment at Maxwell International School, a Bahá'í institution in Shawnigan Lake, British Columbia,

where he and his wife, Deloria, began working in 1991.<sup>9</sup> Bighorn was inspired by intersections that he saw between Indigenous spiritual principles and Maxwell's pedagogic philosophy. Still, everyday interactions at the school proved a challenge. As he shared:

I would say something at a staff meeting, I remember one time distinctly, offering something in my style, I wasn't conscious that it was a style at the time, but I said what I said, and there was no response. I thought I was making a contribution. Well, I heard somebody else say something, say what I meant, the person said what I meant, the way I said it, so I thought we were speaking together, but when this person said it, everybody said, “Yeah, yeah, yeah! That's a good idea!” And I reached around and I said, “I just said that!” And the person turned to me [and said], “Jacob, you speak in metaphors!” And I got confused: Is that a downer? Is that an upper? Or this person, is she frustrated? Is it her problem? Is it my problem? [...] And, I think that was the challenge then.

---

9 Maxwell International School, named for early Canadian Bahá'ís May and William Sutherland Maxwell, the parents of Rúhíyyih Khánum, was a co-ed school for students in grades seven through twelve; it opened in 1988 and closed in 2008.

That's an aspect of being Bahá'í, that's the diversity . . . in the end, I think that's part of why I worked my way out [from teaching at the school]. It was too frustrating, it took its toll on my heart, my health, I think, which is symbolic of suicides, the high rate of suicides amongst Natives, all the other emotional, psychological troubles, and health troubles—that this degree of low self-esteem and not caring, not being in charge of one's own destiny, the sense of destiny is in someone else's hands and so forth. So it's diminishing, diminishes the spiritual strength.

Bighorn further addressed such tensions in relation to dreams and visions. Speaking in a contemporary context, he explained how persistent patterns of cultural dominance lead people to keep their dreams and visions private:

because for the most part, non-Native communities are left-brain thinkers, who dominate social scenes or processes, even in the Bahá'í Faith, they tend to diminish or belittle, unconsciously, belittle the existence of such experiences held by Native people who have these dreams. So sometimes these unique experiences, experiences unique to the Native way of thinking, are discounted as meaningless, because nobody else, especially the people in authority, the legitimizers, if they

don't have these dreams, if they don't think they're important, then apparently, in my experience, my unique experience, [it's] not significant, it's not valuable. So it could be sometimes a daily battle, a daily process against energy to maintain a sense of value, of what one sees in your mind, or imagination, or a spiritual definition, is worth something. When all around, the social standards, the cultural values surrounding you do not acknowledge your existence. Or the existence of your unique way of seeing things.

As members of settler society, non-Indigenous Bahá'ís not only reaped the material benefits of a long history of Indigenous land dispossession, but they were also inheritors of a less tangible form of self-assurance and privilege that derived from having one's worldview and modes of interaction consistently validated and reinforced by overarching social and cultural cues.<sup>10</sup> As Hesquiaht Bahá'í J. C. Lucas, also from Vancouver Island, observed of his own experience:

the culture, the mainstream culture, in some parts of the Bahá'í community, people don't realize how strong it is. When Native people come in and there's a pressure, without really being

---

10 On settler society and the privilege that accrues to its members see, for example, Regan.

pressurized. A lot of the stuff comes in. And it triggered me quite seriously some years ago and I just began to withdraw. And my old residential school things came to the fore. So I just kind of withdrew. I still teach, I still pray early in the morning, every day since 1980, actually.

Lucas took care to note that he's "not mad at the Bahá'ís" and that he still "love[s] and honor[s] the Bahá'í Faith." His decision to pull back from active community participation seemingly stemmed not from specific actions on the part of particular Bahá'ís, but from the broader social context that he, as an Indigenous person, found particularly painful to navigate. Simply operating in the environment of the dominant culture, where non-Indigenous Bahá'ís and attendant social patterns predominated, invoked the living legacies of such damaging experiences as residential schools and ultimately led to his retreat from Bahá'í community life. Experiences like these underline just how deep colonial wounds continue to cut and suggest the significant obstacles that exist to building unity, even in a community explicitly committed to this cause.

Racism and paternalism further undermined the prospect of unity in diversity in practice and often took crass forms as well as more subtle iterations. Mohawk Bahá'í Linda Loft, for example, recalled the pain she felt when, not long after moving to Victoria, British Columbia, in the early 1970s, she

offered to assist with the preparation for an upcoming Bahá'í gathering and a detailed discussion over décor ensued. Her experience reveals a pattern of normative practice and prejudice: "the next thing was, well, 'We have to sit down and really discuss this, because this is such an important occasion, we don't want daffodils. We need to know here that roses are going to be needed.'" Loft recalled thinking:

"Well, what am I?" But I didn't say anything. Being the way I am. But I was extremely hurt by that statement. But I saved face, I just put that behind me. But that just isn't meant to happen. Of course I know it's going to be roses. Of course I'm going to try and get the best of what we'll have at the season, at this time, in this different place. And of course I'm going to have tablecloths on our tables.

She continued, elaborating on the pejorative implications of this exchange:

Take, for instance, maybe I live on reserve.<sup>11</sup> Maybe I've never ever seen a rose. Maybe I've never ever seen a daffodil, you know? Maybe I'm so remote there's no flowers growing around where I live [...]. Now, I've got to set this here place up. Now I'm picturing myself,

---

11 Loft herself grew up on the Tyendinaga Reserve in southern Ontario (Watts and Verge).

take myself out of that situation, put myself in a different situation such as the one I just explained, and, “Yeah sure, I’ll do that [volunteer to help set up].” A stick might be the most precious thing to me, that I would put in my most expensive container, and put it on the table. Maybe a cedar bough, maybe a circle of rocks might be the best thing, you know? Maybe to me that is really offering everything I could, from the heart, for my Creator. And I know that the people that are coming, that are going to be attending, are going to feel my joy of being able to do these things. Being able to put this event on to the best of my ability. Not judge me for what their standard is, being better than mine, or mine being better than theirs either.

Echoing an emphasis on process also articulated by other interviewees, Loft stressed the relative youth of the Bahá’í religion and framed moments like this as significant learning opportunities. She and other interviewees stressed that tension was inevitable as what Shoghi Effendi called the “embryonic” Bahá’í community took new intercultural form (Loft; Covey; Shales; Kahn; Shoghi Effendi, *Bahá’í Administration* 90). As Nedra Greenaway, a Bahá’í of Metis and Chinese heritage, stated in a clear expression of Bahá’í historical consciousness, “Comfort isn’t on the agenda in the next one hundred or so years.” Yet comfort is relative.

The exchange that Loft experienced as painful paternalism, for example, likely went unregistered by those insisting on roses.

How Indigenous Bahá’ís themselves participated in intercultural community had much to do with their own personal and family histories. What were painful incidents to some because of previous experiences of colonial violence or trauma, for example, may not have been taken this way by others from different backgrounds. Where some interviewees were accustomed to, if not entirely comfortable, interacting in non-Indigenous society when they became Bahá’ís, for others, partaking in this religious community required a more radical step. Lee Brown, for his part, shared that he takes some responsibility for the difficulties that he has had interacting in Bahá’í communities, noting, “I know because of the trauma of my youth I overreact to things.” Despite painful memories that continue to affect his life and that led to periodic retreat from the Bahá’í community, Brown also stressed that he is pleased to be part of a community that is grappling with these issues: “I think that’s very important. You know, it’s difficult and it’s hard, but we’re doing something that’s very hard—we’re trying to bring human beings together, and that’s not an easy thing. But I’m glad to be part of a community that’s attempting to do that.”

One of the key tools that Bahá’ís employed, and continue to use, in this process of community building

is consultation. Bahá'ís are instructed in their discussion and decision-making processes to apply this method, which counsels “the ‘subjugation of all egotism and unruly passions, the cultivation of frankness and freedom of thought as well as courtesy, openness of mind, and wholehearted acquiescence in a majority decision” (The Universal House of Justice, letter dated 10 June 1966). Several interviewees noted similarities between Indigenous and Bahá'í methods of consultation and suggested that more flexible and responsive modes of communication have developed within the Bahá'í community over time owing, in part, to Indigenous representation on Bahá'í institutions like Local and National Spiritual Assemblies (Jacob Bighorn; Gubatayao-Hagen). In the decades examined for this research, however, the focus and tone of consultation seem to have been frequently set by majority adherents, who found their own cultural cues and assumptions silently confirmed in and by the Bahá'í community at large. During this period, strong emphasis on Bahá'í expansion, as opposed to building internal community understanding, further exacerbated such tensions (Brown; Lane).

Despite a sincere desire for Indigenous difference within the Bahá'í community, an overwhelming emphasis by some on unity often functioned to shut down necessary discussion of diversity. This was, and in some instances remains, a source of tension within the Bahá'í community. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá directed adherents to:

take counsel together in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise. This can be attained when every member expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should any one oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed. The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions. (*Selections* 44:1)

Shoghi Effendi further called for consultation that is “frank and unfettered” (qtd. in Hornby 579). In practice, though, the tendency to avoid any hint of tension or disunity at times kept Bahá'ís of diverse stripes from openly confronting such controversial subjects as racism within the Bahá'í community.<sup>12</sup>

Deloria Bighorn observed of her own personal pattern of activity and retreat within the Bahá'í community:

I remember the last time I left the [Nineteen Day] Feast and I thought, that’s it, I’m not going back. It was when I was at Maxwell [International School] in ’90, I’m going to say ’95, ’96, maybe

---

<sup>12</sup> Bahá'í teachings on backbiting likewise contributed to reticence on the part of many interviewees to speak directly to the subject of intercultural tension within the Bahá'í community in their interviews with me.

sometime in there. I remember feeling so frustrated that I just got up out of the Feast and left. And that was the magic day. Because I went home and I prayed about it, I talked to my parents about it and I thought, why am I leaving? How is anything going to be different if I don't stay? How is anything ever going to change if I just keep leaving? Every time I leave, then that's one less voice to say something different. And it was a big "aha" moment, but that's what happened for me. I can see that it's different for different people, but I guess the only way I reconciled it is how I deal with it. How I deal with it is that, the basic teaching is the teaching of unity, right? And the basic law under that is contention and conflict are forbidden in the *Aqdas* [the *Kitab-i-Aqdas*], it says. They're forbidden. So, I got to do something about that. I cannot be in conflict with somebody else, to be right with my God. So I can certainly feel it, but I got to work on it, I got to do something about it. I can ask nobody else to be accountable for that but me. So that's when I quit leaving the table.

For Bighorn, aspiring to achieve unity proved a prompt for addressing internal Bahá'í tension. She noted that since she joined the religion in the late 1960s, there has been significant improvement in intercultural communication and understanding within the

Bahá'í community. At the same time, her reflections imply that the onus for raising issues of intercultural tension continues to fall on Indigenous adherents like her, as it generally did during the intervening period, when many non-Indigenous Bahá'ís (White ones especially) were unaware of the scale of their own privilege and, reluctant to engage in "frank and full" consultation, proved ill-prepared to fully plumb its implications.<sup>13</sup>

Tensions like these stimulated a sense of solidarity among Indigenous adherents and sometimes encouraged interactions between them. As Deloria Bighorn reflected: "the Native people, the Native Bahá'ís, always helped each other, always tried to help each other. Always tried to reach out to each other. Always recognized that there was a desire to have more of us and that it was a hard go. That there were other people who were trying." Mutual support efforts included gatherings such as "Native Councils" in Alaska (discussed

---

13 Deloria Bighorn employed the phrase "frank and full consultation" in our interview together. Consultation has proved a challenging process outside of the Indigenous context as well. Writing about the Atlanta Bahá'í community, for example, Michael McMullen shared a joke he encountered several times in the course of his research: "although Shoghi Effendi counsels 'the spirit of frank and loving consultation,' (1974, [*Bahá'í Administration*] 63) 'frank is often left out in the car' when [a Local Spiritual Assembly] meeting begins" (45).



also by Joyce Baldwin in this volume). Marilyn Patterson reported in a 1978 *Bahá'í News* article that these gatherings were organized “in response to the need to find an effective way for native Indian and Eskimo believers to express their concerns.” “Basically,” she explains, “the Native Council is a teaching [and deepening] conference conducted for natives within a native setting. The Native Council allows the native believers to participate fully and easily in their own unique way.” Alluding to intercultural tension within the Bahá'í community, Patterson added that while non-Indigenous adherents were welcomed as observers and dignitaries were to be “acknowledged and given the freedom of the floor,” the intention of the Councils “is to encourage the participation of native peoples and avoid domination by non-natives” (11). While heartening for Indigenous participants, however, separate gatherings like these were contested by some non-Indigenous Bahá'ís, who disputed the need for distinct Indigenous spaces within the community and objected to what they saw as sectarian events undermining the principle of unity.<sup>14</sup>

This was not a new charge, nor one limited to internal Bahá'í affairs

---

14 Such tensions were addressed by Bastow, Loft, and Sargent in their interviews, and also by the non-Indigenous Bahá'í Fletcher Bennett, who was active in Indigenous teaching on the Northwest Coast and who was also involved in bringing Native Councils to British Columbia (Bennett). See also Savin, 108, 114.

(Garlington 137–38). White Bahá'í Dorothy Baker, for example, recalled the mixed reaction that met a call from Shoghi Effendi in the mid-twentieth century for two new teaching committees, one to reach “the Negro minority of America” and the other “the Indian tribes of this continent.” As Baker describes in a 1953 address:

some of us, to draw out further light on the subject, even questioned a great deal about the kind of psychology that might ensue if you had a committee just to reach the Negro, but he [Shoghi Effendi] rather scoffed at it in a precious kind of way, and firmly reiterated that without special attention we simply had not done it, and that the important thing is to do it. (2)

Dubbed by Shoghi Effendi “the most challenging issue,” Black-White relations have been a longstanding area of concern for American Bahá'ís (Garlington 115–21; Venters; Etter-Lewis and Thomas). And Indigenous and Black Bahá'ís themselves sometimes made common cause, no doubt through a sense of racialized solidarity (Deloria Bighorn).

Indigenous peoples are the subject of what has been described as the sole “racial” prophecy in the sacred Bahá'í texts (Pemberton-Piggot 34). (See discussion of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s prophecy concerning Indigenous peoples in the introduction to this volume.) While the prospect of forging community

within the Bahá'í community was contested, Indigenous adherents thus had a unique impulse and justification for doing so. None of the Indigenous Bahá'ís whom I interviewed pointed to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prophecy (or, as some alternately described it, "mandate," "credo," "promise," "gift," or "destiny") as an initial motivation for becoming Bahá'í.<sup>15</sup> But they all identified it as an important, if ambiguous, subsequent mandate. A number struggled with the loaded language of savagery that the passage contains but were simultaneously buoyed by what they read as a recognition of the particular spiritual capacity of Indigenous people.<sup>16</sup> Some interviewees described the prophecy as specific to North America, while most saw it extending throughout the Americas or to the Indigenous world at large. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement was, and remains, an active subject of personal meditation and shared deliberation among Indigenous Bahá'ís.<sup>17</sup>

---

15 Though none pointed to the prophecy as specific explanation for declaration, it did motivate Indigenous enrollment to the degree that it inspired Bahá'í outreach to Indigenous peoples. Various characterizations of the prophecy include those from Healy, McDermott, Gubatayao-Hagen, and Greenaway.

16 See Horton (51-61) for discussion of different translations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement concerning Indigenous peoples.

17 In 2008, for example, Indigenous Bahá'ís from diverse backgrounds came together in a series of regional gatherings on the West Coast to consult on the

As Deloria Bighorn related, "We're always pondering this. What did 'Abdu'l-Bahá mean? What are we supposed to do about it?"

Queries like this motivated and enabled Indigenous Bahá'ís to come together in a community of their own. Workshops at a Continental Indigenous Council held on the Blood (Kainai) Reserve in August 1982, for example, were guided by the questions, "Who are we, as native Bahá'ís?," "Where are we heading?" and "What is our responsibility?" ("Excitement Builds as Native Council Approaches" 37). A *Bahá'í Canada* report on the gathering elaborated:

A frequent topic of frank consultation during the workshops, according to one observer, was the issue of dealing with a predominantly white society including non-Native Bahá'ís. During the consultation the indigenous friends spoke of their need to overcome fears and prejudices and to become one not only with other Native believers but with all of the friends. Participants offered one another strong encouragement to accomplish this. ("Third North American Native Council" 8)

---

subject with Violette and Ali Nakhjavani, the first a close travel companion and confidant of Rúhíyyih Khánúm and the second a former member of the Universal House of Justice.

Organized by an Indigenous Bahá'í committee of the same name, with members appointed by the National Spiritual Assemblies of the Bahá'ís of Canada, the United States, and Alaska, Continental Indigenous Councils were held in locations across North America beginning in 1978 on the Yakama Reservation in Washington.<sup>18</sup>

At these gatherings, which drew the participation of hundreds of Indigenous Bahá'ís from across the Americas, participants pondered their specific roles in the religion, consulted on living legacies of colonialism in and outside the Bahá'í community, and celebrated and enacted intertribal cultural exchange.<sup>19</sup> Though geared specifically toward Indigenous Bahá'ís, the Councils were also open to non-Indigenous adherents; the Second Council, held in July 1980 on the grounds of the National Bahá'í Center

in Wilmette, Illinois, in fact included separate sessions for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Bahá'ís. This gathering closed with a large powwow attended by upwards of one thousand people, including non-Indigenous Bahá'ís and non-Bahá'í Indigenous people from nearby Chicago ("Native Council"). Lee Brown described this Council as "one of the biggest events I ever went to, as far as Native Bahá'ís go, and one of the real highlights of my entire life." Relationships forged at periodic events like these in turn informed local Bahá'í community life as well. It was, for example, after consulting with Diné Bahá'ís at the Council in Wilmette, where they shared that their Nineteen Day Feast could last an entire day, with many hours of prayer, that Brown and other Bahá'ís on the Okanagan Reserve in British Columbia made the decision to hold a pipe ceremony as the devotional component of their Feast (Brown).

Indigenous Bahá'ís built a community of their own when they came together at such gatherings to celebrate and share cultural knowledge, to consult on persistent colonial currents in North America, and to discuss their own prophesied place in the Bahá'í religion. Through participation in the broader Bahá'í community, they also built strong relationships of mutual respect with non-Indigenous Bahá'ís. Indeed, the teaching of unity in diversity established an imperative for intercultural relationship building that many Indigenous Bahá'ís described as refreshing and profoundly healing. At

---

18 The first Council was held in 1978 in White Swan, on the Yakama Reservation in Washington; the second in 1980 on the grounds of the National Bahá'í Centre in Wilmette, Illinois; the third in 1982 on the Blood (Kainai) Reserve in Alberta; the fourth in 1985 in Fairbanks, Alaska; the fifth in 1988 on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation in South Dakota; and the sixth in 1991 at Maxwell International School in Shawnigan Lake, British Columbia.

19 The third Council on the Blood Reserve, for example, drew the participation of over four hundred Indigenous Bahá'ís from ten countries and sixty different tribes ("Third North American Native Council" 8).

the same time, experiences of building intercultural Bahá'í community between the 1960s and the early 1990s could be fraught with pain and anxiety for Indigenous adherents. Indigenous Bahá'ís frequently encountered tensions of intercultural communication and understanding and sometimes outright racism, experiences that led

some to pull back from active community practice. Implementing unity in diversity is a gradual process that continues to be worked out in particular contexts over time. This process itself reveals the Bahá'í religion's role as a rich space of intercultural contact and community building, learning, and exchange.

## WORKS CITED

- 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988. Print.
- Addison, Donald. Personal interview. 23-24 June 2008.
- Baker, Dorothy. "Text of Taped Message by Hand of the Cause Dorothy Baker, Ridván 1953." Box 15. M-378. Kenneth Jeffers papers. National Bahá'í Archives, Wilmette, IL. Accessed June 2008.
- Bastow, Jack. Personal interview. 24 July 2004.
- Bennett, Fletcher. Personal interview. 21 July 2004.
- Bighorn, Deloria. Personal interview. 20 March 2008.
- Bighorn, Jacob. Personal interview. 11 August 2004.
- Brown, Lee. Personal interview. 21 March and 29 October 2008.
- Clifford, James. "Varieties of Indigenous Experience: Diasporas, Homelands, Sovereignties." *Indigenous Experience Today*. Ed. Marisol de la Cadena and Orin Starn. New York: Berg, 2007. 197-224. Print.
- Cobb, Daniel and Loretta Fowler, eds. *Beyond Red Power: American Indian Politics and Activism*. Santa Fe, NM: School for Advanced Research Press, 2007. Print.
- Covey, Linda S. "Diné Becoming Bahá'í: Through the Lens of Ancient Prophecies." MA thesis, Missouri State University, 2011. Print.
- . Personal interview. 10 June 2008.
- Echevarria, Lynn. "The Canadian Baha'is 1938-2000: Constructions of Oneness in Personal and Collective Identity." *Baha'i and Globalisation*. Ed. Margit Warburg, Annika Hvithamar, and Morten Warmind. Aarhus, Denmark: Aarhus UP, 2005. 221-44. Print.
- Etter-Lewis, Gwendolyn and Richard Thomas, eds. *Lights of the Spirit: Historical Portraits of Black Bahá'ís in North America, 1898-2000*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2006. Print.
- "Excitement Builds as Native Council Approaches" *Bahá'í Canada* 4.1 (March/April/May 1982): 37. Print.

- Garlington, William. *The Baha'i Faith in America*. London: Praeger, 2005. Print.
- Greenaway, Nedra. Personal interview. 12 March 2008.
- Gubatayao-Hagen, Mary. Personal interview. 11 July and 19 August 2008.
- Healy, Allison. Personal interview. 27 April 2008.
- Hornby, Helen Bassett, ed. *Lights of Guidance: A Bahá'í Reference File*. New Delhi, India: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2010. Print.
- Horton, Chelsea. "All is One: Becoming Indigenous and Baha'i in Global North America." PhD thesis, University of British Columbia, 2013. Print.
- Johnson, Troy R., Joane Nagel, and Duane Champagne, eds. *American Indian Activism: Alcatraz to the Longest Walk*. Urbana, IL: U of Illinois P, 1997. Print.
- Kahn, Tina Rainwater. Personal interview. 21 June 2009.
- Knowlton, Beverly. Personal interview. 26 April 2008.
- Lane Jr., Phil. Personal interview. 3 January 2009.
- Locke, Kevin. Personal interview. 28 March 2008.
- Loft, Linda. Personal interview. 16 August 2004.
- Lucas, J. C. Personal interview. 6 October 2004.
- McDermott, Eleanora. Personal interview. 25 April 2008.
- McMullen, Michael. *The Bahá'í: The Religious Construction of a Global Identity*. Piscataway, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2000. Print.
- National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States. *Circle of Unity*. Rev. ed. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980. Print.
- "Native Council." *Bahá'í News* (Sept. 1980): 2-7. Print.
- Patterson, Marilyn. "Alaska's Native Councils: A New Mode of Expression." *Bahá'í News* (July 1978): 11. Print.
- "Peigans Open Welcome Baha'i Centre." *Lethbridge Herald* (21 July 1986): 3. Print.
- Pemberton-Piggot, Andrew. "The Bahá'í Faith in Alberta; 1942-1992: The Ethic of Dispersion." MA thesis, University of Alberta, 1992. Print.
- Rabbani, Rúhíyyih. *A Message to the Indian and Eskimo Bahá'ís of the Western Hemisphere*. Toronto: Bahá'í Canada Publications, 1969. Print.
- . Letter to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada. 28 Oct. 1986.
- Regan, Paulette. *Unsettling the Settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada*. Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 2010. Print.
- "Ruby Gubatayao Served the Cause Among Native Peoples." 28 March 2011. <http://www.bahai.us/2011/03/28/ruby-gubatayao-served-the-cause-among-native-peoples/> Accessed 28 Sept. 2016.
- Sargent, John. Personal interview. 16 Feb. 2005.
- Sawin, Carolyn Patterson. "Native Conversion, Native Identity: An Oral History of the Bahá'í Faith among First Nations People in the Southern Central Yukon Territory, Canada." PhD thesis, University of Washington, 2000. Print.

- Shales, Joyce. Personal interview. 29-30 July 2008.
- Shoghi Effendi. "Living the Life." *Compilation of Compilations*. Vol. 2. Ed. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice. Mona Vale, NSW: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 1991. 1-28. Print.
- . *Bahá'í Administration*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974. Print.
- Smith, Andrea. *Native Americans and the Christian Right: The Gendered Politics of Unlikely Alliances*. Durham: Duke UP, 2008. Print.
- "Third North American Native Council." *Bahá'í News* 620 (Nov. 1982): 8. Print.
- Tyler, Klara. Personal interview. 8 July 2008.
- Umtuch, Lorintha. Personal interview. 21 June 2008.
- The Universal House of Justice. Letter to the Bahá'í Youth in Every Land, 10 June 1966.
- . Letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly. 26 March 1982. *Aspects of Traditional African Culture*. Ed. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice. 1998. Web.
- Vásquez, Manuel A. and Marie F. Marquardt. *Globalizing the Sacred: Religion Across the Americas*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2003. Print.
- Venters III, Louis E. "'Most Great Reconstruction': The Baha'i Faith in Jim Crow South Carolina, 1898-1965." PhD thesis, University of South Carolina, 2010. Print.
- Verge, Patricia. *Angus: From the Heart: The Life of Counsellor Angus Corwan*. Cochrane, AB: Springtide, 1999. Print.
- Walbridge, Linda. "Rituals: An American Bahá'í Dilemma," *Bahá'í Studies Review* 5.1 (1995). Web. Accessed 28 Sept. 2016.
- Warburg, Margit. *Citizens of the World: A History and Sociology of the Baha'is from a Globalisation Perspective*. Leiden, NL: Brill, 2006. Print.
- Watts, Evelyn Loft and Patricia Verge. *Return to Tyendinaga: The Story of Jim and Melba Loft, Bahá'í Pioneers*. Essex, MD: One Voice, 2011. Print.
- Were, Graeme. "Thinking Through Images: Kastom and the Coming of the Baha'is to Northern New Ireland, Papua New Guinea." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 11 (2005): 659-76. Print.
- "The Wide Path of Service: An Editorial." *Bahá'í Canada* 297 (Nov. 1976): 2. Print.





Patricia Locke, MacArthur Fellow and first Native American woman elected to National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States.

*(Photo courtesy of National Bahá'í Archives, United States)*

# Encouragement, Challenges, Healing, and Progress: The Bahá'í Faith in Indigenous Communities

ALFRED KAHN JR.

## *Abstract*

In his article, Alfred Kahn calls for all people to participate in a conversation about the challenges of Indigenous Communities and to participate in community-building activities among Indigenous people. Nephew of Franklin Kahn, the first Native American to be elected to the National Spiritual Assembly, the author shares his perspective on growing up among Bahá'í pioneers on Indigenous land. He also shares his candid assessment of the prophetic promises in the Bahá'í Writings about Native Americans' potential to contribute greatly to the peoples of the world once they have reconciled their own traditional views and teachings with the global promises of Bahá'u'lláh.

## *Resumé*

Dans cet article, Alfred Kahn appelle tout le monde à contribuer à une conversation collective concernant les défis auxquels sont confrontées les communautés autochtones et à prendre part à des activités de renforcement communautaire au sein des peuples autochtones. Neveu de Franklin Kahn – premier Autochtone américain

élu comme membre de l'Assemblée spirituelle nationale – l'auteur présente ses réflexions sur l'expérience qu'il a vécue en grandissant parmi des pionniers bahá'ís en territoire autochtone. Il présente également une évaluation franche des promesses prophétiques que l'on trouve dans les écrits bahá'ís concernant le potentiel qu'ont les Autochtones d'apporter une importante contribution aux peuples du monde une fois qu'ils auront concilié leurs propres perspectives et enseignements traditionnels avec les promesses universelles de Bahá'u'lláh.

## *Resumen*

En su artículo, Alfred Kahn llama a todas las personas a participar de una conversación sobre los desafíos que enfrentan las Comunidades Indígenas y a participar en actividades de construcción de comunidad entre la gente indígena. Nieto de Franklin Khan, el primer Nativo Americano a ser elegido a la Asamblea Espiritual Nacional, el autor comparte su perspectiva sobre criarse entre pioneros bahá'ís en tierra indígena. También comparte su evaluación cándida sobre las promesas proféticas en las Escrituras Bahá'ís sobre el potencial de los Nativos Americanos a contribuir grandemente a los pueblos del mundo cuando hayan reconciliado sus propios puntos de vista tradicionales y enseñanzas con las promesas globales de Bahá'u'lláh.

To be Indigenous is to be part of an immense, diverse, and gifted segment of humanity. I am descended from the Cherokee, Osage, and Navajo Tribes. I grew up on Diné Land—Diné is the correct and ancient name for my people, who are often referred to by the Puebloan term “Navajo,” although

both names continue to be used interchangeably. I am a third generation Bahá'í, beginning with both sets of Indigenous grandparents. I bring to the conversation about the future of Indigenous people a lifetime of experience and contemplation, and yet Indigenous challenges are not universal, simple, or static. We all are keepers of our heritage, and our Creator has granted each of us a distinct perspective.

At this auspicious time, all people have an opportunity to come together and share our struggles and learn from one another. Indigenous people, as a member of the human family, have issues that must be allowed to come to the forefront, be fairly examined and dealt with in a timely manner. Questions need to be asked at this critical moment: Who are we as an Indigenous people? How do we heal from racism? How do we heal from colonization? How do we heal from a genocide that still has not been appropriately recognized? How do we remember who we were—and are—without the distorting influence of hate and cultural genocide? How do we move forward? Must we as Indigenous people take a step toward unity among ourselves before we can take a step toward unity with the world?

#### NATIVE YOUTH TODAY

A conversation about the future of Indigenous people must start with a dialogue about young people today, and we can begin by looking at a vital

issue facing Native communities: Why are so many Native youth committing suicide?<sup>1</sup> I grew up in a community where it has become commonplace to hear that one's relative or fellow community member has committed suicide. Why is it happening? When did it begin? How did we get to this point? What do these actions mean? What forces lead these youth to take such drastic action? Native communities are left to ponder questions such as these, questions that persistently go unanswered.

To demonstrate a few contextual points, I would like to share a personal story. A friend of mine, who is not of Indigenous descent but who grew up close to the reservation with me, started a conversation with me that went as follows:

“I think Navajos need to find a way to become wealthy.”

I replied, “It is hard to become wealthy when the whole system is against you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, we are mostly poor,” I answered, “because we are recovering from many generational traumas.”

“What are generational traumas?” he asked.

---

1 Note that “Indigenous” and “Native” are used interchangeably among American Indians in the United States. Both words equally identify the original inhabitants of North America. The terms “Indigenous” and “Aboriginal” are more commonly used in Canada to refer to First Nations people.

"If you go back six hundred years, we had a form of wealth," I responded. "We found wealth in our family systems built up over generations. About four hundred years ago the incursion of colonizers stripped much of that away and changed the way we view wealth. We as a people are still suffering from the events of those times."

He commented, "But things are equal now. People can just go find a job and build up wealth."

I answered: "In one sense that is true. But there are so many obstacles between the will to find a job and the long path toward wealth, like a significant lack of education, limited access to good health care and to nutritious food, and dangerous living conditions. We Native people face both blatant and subtle racism daily in all aspects of life—not to mention the obstacles that come from our own families, who expect us to remain on the reservation and take care of them, or from those who do not value education or money. When some of us embark on the path toward wealth, we encounter roadblocks from the outside world, but we are also pulled back from those within our tribe."

"Well, at least it's not as bad as when there was segregation, and racism is pretty much gone, isn't it? I mean, we really don't need affirmative action anymore because that just makes it harder on poor

whites, who have it just as bad as poor Natives or blacks."

"Yes, it is true," I said, "that being poor is challenging no matter your race. But the reality is that we are still suffering the consequences of the genocide of the 1800s, the enforced boarding school policies of the 1900s, and the cultural suffocation of our generation by the dominant culture through outdated government policies that are taking decades to change. The effects can be seen in parents who don't know the Navajo language and didn't teach it to their kids but then berate them for not speaking it; in the youth who begin life full of hope but gradually find their outlook on life darkening. The effects are all around us, and they stem from a rampant materialism that convinces Native youth to buy Nikes for a couple of hundred dollars when they can't even afford to eat three meals a day."

"Well what can I do about it?" he asked.

"Conversations like this one need to happen more often because part of the challenge is that most non-Indigenous individuals seem to have this expectation that the Navajo and other tribal people should just "pull themselves up by their bootstraps." If we can have deeper, more nuanced conversations, we can start to find ways to heal. Native or not, we all have a responsibility to foster this vital healing process." I concluded.

We do not live in isolation. We are influenced by the views and attitudes of the people around, and we in turn influence the world; we are the product of these interactions. To move forward, we have to be able to engage in meaningful conversations about sensitive topics such as race, materialism, our history, our current situation—discourses that all too often are stripped down to clichés and polarized dichotomies. It is difficult and often uncomfortable for an Indigenous and a non-Indigenous person to speak face to face and candidly address such harsh realities. For Indigenous people, it is far easier just to set aside these issues in an attempt to forget about them, to sink into the abyss of drug or alcohol addiction, to lay blame without attempting to be conciliatory, and, when all else fails, to contemplate suicide as a means of escape from the harsh realities of life on most reservations.

Far too many Indigenous youth are shut in the psychological prison of knowing something is wrong but not being able to articulate the things they experience and feel. They are forced to try to communicate with a world that they suspect, most often correctly, is uninterested in their pain. The result is that suicides among Indigenous youth, junior youth included, have increased exponentially over the past twenty years, with the majority occurring on Indigenous reservations in the United States, on First Nations reserves in Canada, and in self-governing Indigenous territories

in the upper Arctic regions, such as Nunavut.<sup>2</sup>

Sadly, Native youth caught in this situation also feel an increasing and urgent pressure to be “Native,” to somehow be “better” in a world that has lost most of the institutions, structures, leaders, and community support that once constituted the foundation of Native life. The inability to articulate the reality of these forces—combined with pressures from teachers, commercials, friends, families, communities, tribes, and themselves—is what leads many Indigenous youth to destructive outlets and some, ultimately, to suicide.

Bahá'u'lláh brought the remedy for these and all the problems that society as a whole faces, and it is the revealed Word of God. God knows the pain of these youth, and they can find comfort in such sentiments as: “When calamity striketh, be ye patient and composed. However afflictive your sufferings may be, stay ye undisturbed, and with perfect confidence in the abounding

---

2 The suicide rate among American Indian youth on reservations and in Canada on the reserves is well documented, with too many sources to list here. See, for example, a 9 March 2014 article in *The Washington Post* that says, “The silence that has shrouded suicide in Indian country is being pierced by growing alarm at the sheer numbers of young Native Americans taking their own lives—more than three times the national average, and up to 10 times the average on some reservations” (Horwitz).

grace of God, brave ye the tempest of tribulations and fiery ordeals" (Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 35:12). They become empowered when they understand that their calamities are God's providence<sup>3</sup> and that He can transmute their abysmal distress into blissful joy. So it is that we can well ask: How do we as a community help these youth? How do we deliver this healing message?

I have found no better way than the institute process devised by the Universal House of Justice,<sup>4</sup> together with the example of our lives. 'Abdu'l-Bahá revealed a prayer appropriate to this desire: "How can I succeed unless Thou assist me with the breath of the Holy Spirit, help me to triumph by the hosts of Thy glorious kingdom, and shower upon me Thy confirmations, which alone can change a gnat into an eagle, a drop of water into rivers and seas, and an atom into lights and

---

3 "O SON OF MAN! My calamity is My providence, outwardly it is fire and vengeance, but inwardly it is light and mercy. Hasten thereunto that thou mayest become an eternal light and an immortal spirit. This is My command unto thee, do thou observe it" (Bahá'u'lláh, Arabic Hidden Words no. 51).

4 The concept of training institutes was introduced by the Universal House of Justice in the mid-1990s. Its purpose is to assist individuals in deepening their understanding of the Bahá'í teachings and to help them gain the spiritual insights and the practical skills they need to carry out the work of the community.

suns?" (*Tablets* 10:13). How can we be the conduits of God's confirmations? What process changes a gnat into an eagle? And how long does it take?

One major step for youth in this difficult position is to develop the language necessary to have an informed conversation about the historical reality of the negative forces to which they are subjected. This process may take a lifetime, and it requires training, along with a willingness on the part of the individual to commit to the twofold moral purpose of individual and collective transformation. In my experience, once Native youth are able to have a conversation about and better understand the internal and external forces that are assailing them, they will often then find themselves facing the hard decision as to whether they should speak about their experiences to people who cannot entirely grasp the depth or breadth of this pain and this reality because they have not experienced the same challenges.

Perhaps when there will be a multitude of animators and facilitators<sup>5</sup> on the reservations, the process will advance more rapidly. The process can begin with just one or two ambitious

---

5 A "junior youth animator" is someone who helps instigate programs at the community level to organize youth ages eleven to fourteen to establish positive relationships with one another and to serve the community in which they live. It is one of the four "core activities" established by the Universal House of Justice for the present Five Year Plan.



pioneers. Anyone can arise to be part of this transformation, and it is my hope that this conversation will inspire people to pioneer to reservations, where they can listen to youth, walk on a path of service with them and encourage them to participate in this vital discourse.

#### HEART-LEVEL JOURNEY

Becoming empowered is a journey of the heart, and it relies on friendships and true connections. This life is full of opportunities for us to make such journeys together. These interactions are what develop the positive qualities that we all have the potential to manifest. Our love for God finds its fullest expression in the love shown to His creatures. Our Native creation stories demonstrate this principle. The Holy Ones of Native history interacted with our people, overcame obstacles, and, in the end, taught us what we need to know through their example.

I have been privileged to witness many people make great strides in their personal journeys, extricating themselves from the trap of social ills that afflict Indigenous people. In particular, I have had the joy of witnessing the first glimmerings of the accomplishments of pioneers on Native land who are devoted to humbly serving Indigenous populations. Their souls become aglow with acceptance, love, honor, forgiveness, and, importantly, forbearance. These brilliant stars in my life each have their own stories of triumphs and tribulations.

Their process of transformation can be seen in the sharing between two souls. In my personal journey, for instance, there have been individuals like Jeff Kiely. He has pioneered to the Navajo Nation for close to forty years at the time of this writing. I consider him a mentor and an animator before the role of animator was developed.

When I was twelve years old, he and I were returning from a teaching project in Phoenix, Arizona. Having grown up around trailers and hogans, I was in awe of the vast urban landscape. He asked what I found so interesting, and I told him that I wondered what people were thinking when they decided to create things that way. He told me about architecture—it was the first time I ever heard of the profession. He masterfully linked architecture, sustainability, and cultural expression into one conversation during our three-hour car ride. He shared how people can contribute to the Earth's health by building with respect and care and, conversely, how people can exploit the planet carelessly, with no thought of others. He enabled me to see how these shapers of buildings and cities have the power either to contribute to making the world a better place or to perpetuate the spread of materialism. From that conversation I knew what I was meant to do, and like an arrow I launched myself toward my career path of architecture.

In that one conversation I was accompanied as I shaped my worldview and was empowered to think of myself as a potential contributor to the

future of mankind. At an age of optimism and idealism, I was not told what to think—I was listened to. I was encouraged rather than lectured. My highest aspirations were reinforced rather than ignored.

Erica Toussaint-Brock was another contributor to my development as a junior youth, as she was for many other youth. She was another animator before the term “animator” came into usage in the Bahá’í community. I would spend summers with her when I was a junior youth. She helped to foster in me a closer connection to the Bahá’í Writings. It was with her that I learned of the idea of using the Writings to help channel my energies toward serving mankind and finding a profession that would be of benefit to humanity. She also demonstrated through her example the habit of turning to the Writings to answer important life questions.

Meaningful conversations that transform youth and junior youth happen when one is a true friend and a wise advisor. These opportunities become apparent when we are present on the spiritual path of young people who are forging their own understandings of the world. Often, it is in seemingly small moments like these that the lives of young people undergo the most profound and enduring changes.

#### BAHÁ’Í PIONEERS ON NATIVE LAND

What I would like to focus on in these few words is how we as a people can consciously take constructive action

toward unity—unity with all races. The ultimate goal is to knit hearts together. Whether turning to the Bahá’í Writings or to the Native teachings, one can see that the lives of our heroes and martyrs contribute to this ultimate goal for humankind.

We are in a stage of growth that is unlike any humanity has experienced in the past. Little wonder that those of us on the frontlines of this endeavor sometimes find ourselves perplexed at the challenges and feeling utterly inadequate. Not until there is a sizable number of Native people responsible for our own growth will the many challenges and daunting dynamics fall into the background.

As this process advances, unity becomes increasingly manifest in the community. In our fight against racism and injustice, we are challenged to acknowledge many harsh realities that people of color have long experienced. While we advocate for justice and have frank consultations about real issues, we can keep our focus on the good we see and the growth we witness. The Bahá’í Writings provide the remedy to the many ills that afflict the world, and the guidance from the Universal House of Justice provides the vision of how to implement that remedy. It is incumbent on us Indigenous people to read our reality and courageously apply the Bahá’í teachings to the dire adversities that presently afflict our people.

Whatever culture you come from, sharing your cultural knowledge can be difficult. Indigenous people feel

this acutely because not everything we know can be easily or quickly conveyed. Bahá'u'lláh admonishes: "Not everything that a man knoweth can be disclosed, nor can everything that he can disclose be regarded as timely, nor can every timely utterance be considered as suited to the capacity of those who hear it" (*Gleanings* 99:3). I have found this to be particularly true when attempting to share deep or cultural knowledge with people of other cultures.

When attempting to help Indigenous communities, good intention must be tempered with heightened consciousness. The greatest obstacles that arise while serving communities come from what we do not know, and that ignorance can lead to wrong actions, even if we are well-intentioned. We do not know what we do not know. This challenge of being limited by our perspectives is fundamental to human reality. In this regard not enough emphasis can be placed on the guidance by the Universal House of Justice that we adopt a "humble posture of learning" (Ridván letter 2008). Assuming that one "knows" at any stage in development—whether one is a pioneer or Indigenous—and trying to impose this "knowledge" on others often leads to conflict.

In the fledgling initiatives in which I have participated with Native youth, both on the reservation and off, I have seen well-intentioned individuals swooping in and taking over, seemingly unaware of the detrimental effect of their actions. Influences

of hierarchical control still persist in places where instead there should be accompaniment. Currently, when these problems get brought up in the places that should be safe for open and frank consultation, the people raising them often get dismissed, criticized, isolated, or forgotten. Paternalism deeply permeates attitudes, thoughts, and behaviors, and it may take many generations to overcome it.

Paternalism may be a common attitudinal challenge in the lives of Native people as we strive to teach ourselves about this often unspoken and unrecognized disorder, and we must combat this tendency until we attain self-determination. We must learn how to deal with people who do not know that they are being paternalistic.

I have not yet fully answered this question for myself, except to remember that this whole process is in its embryonic stages and to show more love to all those involved. Bahá'u'lláh says: "Nothing whatever can, in this Day, inflict a greater harm upon this Cause than dissension and strife, contention, estrangement and apathy, among the loved ones of God" (*Gleanings* 5:5). So many times I have seen Native people exert their full energy in teaching, in sharing, and in serving the Faith, only to be ultimately hurt by fellow loved ones, or to become so exhausted by paternalistic attitudes that the initial enthusiasm understandably deteriorates into apathy. We often show love when it is easy, but when our assumptions are challenged, our comfort is impeded, and our modes of operation

are dismissed, we are forced to reach beyond ourselves.

Having grown up on Native land amidst Bahá'í pioneers, I believe one has to learn to love mistakes. Everyone makes them, but that should not stop people from serving or pioneering. Bahá'í institutions should likewise allow for mistakes. Mistakes are how we learn. Mistakes are how we grow. In my experience, mistakes, followed by love and learning, are essential to the institute process.

Our common destiny, Natives and non-Natives alike, should always be at the forefront of our minds. With the thought of oneness in our hearts we can accept that we are not all the same. With love we can continue to work side by side even though we hold different opinions. The time will come when we will have learned as a community that we can have differences between races and cultures without unnecessary division or discord. We will learn that being united does not mean we must all be the same or act the same way. The homogenizing processes so prevalent in society are not the only way—or even the best way—to establish bonds among people. Culture and diversity will gradually become understood as assets, not as impediments, to universal oneness.

#### PROPERLY TRAINING OURSELVES

Whether a teenager on the Pine Ridge reservation, an elder from the Micmac tribe living in New York, a Potawatomi college student

in Oregon, a Tarahumara mother in Juarez, or a Tlingit engineer in Brussels, we all have a bond, a connection. Beyond blood quantum, language, federal recognition, geographic location, and even cultural knowledge, we share a common destiny. And we will either achieve that destiny together or we will fall short of it together.

We can illumine the whole world if we are trained and educated properly. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá prophetically observed, “these Indians, should they be educated and guided, there can be no doubt that they will become so illumined as to enlighten the whole world” (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel* 16). But to achieve this education, we must begin by cleansing our hearts from all the dust and dross of this world.

One of the biggest obstacles to our growth is an attachment to an image of who we are. The world is full of images of Indigenous people portrayed as “noble savages.” These images are pervasive and influence indigenous people in obvious and subtle ways. Cinema's stereotypical depictions of indigenous people play a tremendous role in the minds of viewers including Indigenous people ourselves. Sadly, many highly educated scholars still ascribe to a view of Indigenous people as primitive. This view continues to permeate anthropological, historical and educational literature worldwide. How can we see ourselves clearly if we believe we are part of a backwards race?

Just as harmful—if not more so—is the notion that we are somehow better than the other races. Indigenous people have no inherent superiority over any other race. We strive to distinguish ourselves by our servitude to our Creator. We have been chosen and honored by 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prophecy not because we are better, but quite the opposite. We have been chosen because of our crying need.

Another obstacle to the progress of Indigenous people is the thought that things were better in our heroic past. All of the Creation Stories that have been shared with me demonstrate how our tribes emerged through trials and challenges, growing incrementally each time. We progressed as a result of the crises that our people encountered. If we look at our current situation as the newest phase in this ever-advancing cyclical learning process, we can see that the present condition of the world is not a mistake by our Creator, but rather a great upheaval prophesied by all our Holy People.

Similarly challenging is the notion that we as a people are victims. I know the story of my ancestor who survived the Long Walk.<sup>6</sup> I know firsthand the poisonous effect alcohol has on a family. I witness discrimination daily, as

many do. There are stories too horrible to tell. But we can choose to define ourselves not by our adversities, but rather by our triumphs over them.

Related to these two obstacles is a third—that we seem to need our oppressors to acknowledge these wrongs in order for us to move forward. It may take time, but we as a people can arise independently and shape our own destiny. We have an opportunity not only to forgive past actions, but also to operate with forbearance and love in a world full of injustice.

Perhaps this is not a comprehensive list of all the obstacles we face, but it will serve as a start for an important and necessary discourse about this subject. Once we have truly cleansed our hearts and our minds, we can move forward to the constructive action of properly training and educating ourselves.

The ocean of God's words is vast, and we can find the remedy for our people's ills in the application of His teachings. We are beginning to train ourselves in junior youth groups, study circles, children's classes, and devotional gatherings. We are taking ownership of these initiatives by translating these practices into our Native languages, drawing from our culture to enrich the arts, deriving inspiration from the stories of our Holy People, and promoting those teachings of Theirs that are confirmed in the Bahá'í Writings.

We are in a time of change, and we, as Indigenous Bahá'ís, can influence the global conversation on Indigenous

---

6 See Paul G. Zolbrod's *Diné bahañé: The Navajo Creation Story* (Albuquerque, NM: U of New Mexico P, 1984) and Chester Kahn's interview in Linda Covey's unpublished MA thesis, "Diné Becoming Bahá'í: Through the Lens of Ancient Prophecies" (2011).

identity by affirming the sacred heritages of all people and embracing their inherent diversity. We do not need to create new, man-made lines of division; rather, we need to see that we are all members of one human family. We witness in the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá the special attention paid to those members of the human family most oppressed, and we can arise to shower on the most afflicted of our tribes our concerted assistance and determined effort. We Indigenous people can demonstrate through our example the power of obliterating man-made differences while respecting the heritage and inherent nobility of all people.

#### GRASSROOTS SOCIAL ACTION

My uncles Chester and Franklin Kahn<sup>7</sup> founded the Native American Bahá'í Institute (NABI), an institute conceived not by any national or international body but by the local Navajo population according to its needs. They ventured out of the reservation to get an education, and they discovered the Bahá'í Faith. One of the things that stood out most to them about their first Bahá'í teachers was that the teachers encouraged them to learn and value their culture. My uncles declared their faith in Bahá'u'lláh

and returned home to share the message. The result was the 1962 Council Fire, and later the establishment of NABI.

I grew up around NABI. I have had a front-row seat for an experiment of grassroots social action rarely witnessed in America or the world. I see how people from the community and from all over the world work to put into practice the Bahá'í teachings. I see how the institutions of the Bahá'í Faith try to find a way to support and encourage growth. And I see how the community ebbs and flows around this process.

Old modes of thought and action linger as each new approach to expansion and consolidation is added to the petri dish of a community trying to align itself with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. This sometimes chaotic process has given the slow-paced community of Burntwater, Arizona, in which NABI is located, whiplash on many occasions. At times, people have been pushed to the side or left behind while the process moved forward, but usually these same believers have re-engaged after a period of recovery.

The origin of this problem stems from a need for understanding in the community, as it can be challenging at times for its members to understand decisions that seem to have been made *for* them rather than *by* them or *with* them. Administrators and institutions sometimes attempt to implement their visions based on how they view the facilities and how they think the community should grow. Consequently,

---

7 Both Franklin and Chester Kahn were elected to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, the first Native Americans to be so honored.



the process of learning has been painful for many, but eventually there will be a time when a balance will be struck between the individual, the institutions, and the community—the three protagonists of the plans of the Universal House of Justice.

Energies are dissipated when any one of the three protagonists are suppressed or dominated. Many who have come to serve at NABI have learned a great deal about how to empower Indigenous communities and individuals. They often have had to set aside any previous training in administration that had taught them to embrace a method whereby a few at the top run things for those below them. They have also had to let go of the illusion that they know what's best for the community. This learning process of which NABI has been a part has coincided with the guidance from the Universal House of Justice on these same subjects of accompaniment and grassroots development.

At this point a few Navajo youth have been able to transcend the many pitfalls of society and the dire conditions of the reservation and have arisen to serve. For those who live in the vicinity of NABI, the realities of holding a study circle include traveling one to two hours on dirt roads to gather participants—assuming that they are at home and are not committed to the many demands that reservation life places on them.

Currently, at least one Indigenous youth is toiling at NABI at any given time in order to advance the process.

These one or two youths often come from Bahá'í families and have a lifetime of preparation. They understand much about the challenges and realities of the area while the people who “run” NABI often do not. Much is expected of these youth and they often lack vital accompaniment from supporters.<sup>8</sup>

It has been interesting to see growth and learning happen, only to have the process start all over again with each new NABI administration. The local community is learning to be patient and wait for the time when the administrators' experience matures and they can re-engage. They are learning a lot about how to receive administrators and deal with institutions that think they know what is best, and it is my sincere hope that the Indigenous community will grow to a point where they learn their right to ownership of the process and thereby become empowered to contribute meaningfully to shaping the future of NABI.

The institute process has been helpful in preparing people to serve at NABI, assisting them to internalize concepts such as a “humble posture of learning,” intrinsic motivation, and freedom from paternalism. The first and second milestones<sup>9</sup> of the institute

8 In the context of the institute process, the terms “accompany” and “accompaniment” allude to the practice of assisting others in learning how to carry out the various core activities. Unit 1 of Ruhi Book 10, *Building Vibrant Communities*, is dedicated to this subject.

9 See the letter from the Universal

process are particularly challenging because it seems we have to train people about our reality before they can make any meaningful contribution to the growth of the community. Ultimately, to reach the third milestone we have to turn the challenges of reservation life, racism, paternalism, and materialism into assets. Slowly this is occurring, but not because of improved facilities or big events or the wisdom of outside assistance; rather, it is happening as little spiritual battles are won by the people from within the community itself.

#### WHAT NATIVE PEOPLE WILL BRING TO THE WORLD

We Native people can build upon the rich history and perspectives that we bring to the world and foster material and spiritual advancement in areas of which we have a deep knowledge—such as health, medicine, dreams, the mind, emotion, arts, storytelling, community, prayer, and sacrifice, all of which are dear to our hearts. Our ancient understanding of these concepts is of high value and significance to us, and our focus lies in their continued development, as generations succeed one another.

When I cast my vision forward, like a scout surveying uncharted terrain ahead, I can see the potential of humanity, and Indigenous people

in particular, to make new advancements in science and art. As Native people, we are in touch with our deep knowledge and therefore understand the power of the sacred in accessing dreams, spiritual connections, memory, health, and physical and scientific endeavors. Within the tribes of the earth, great powers and potential lie hidden. The Golden Age of mankind as prophesied by all our Holy People and all the Manifestations will cause the whole world to make tremendous progress on a level never before witnessed by humanity. When that day comes, will Indigenous people of the world be able to contribute the seeds of new knowledge with which God endowed us?

At the present time, the last of the Navajo medicine people who were raised among the established Navajo cultural and social institutions are passing away. A few intrepid youth are striving to live a Navajo way of life while resisting the tides of materialistic cultural influences.

There is an upsurge in the Indigenous preservation movement, but the Navajo Way is not an ancient relic to be preserved in stasis; it is an evolving, changing Beauty Way. It requires an acknowledged consciousness—and a conscientiousness—of the sacred at all times, along with an integrated holistic life in alignment with the well-being of Mother Earth. It has outmoded traditions associated with a warrior society, which lends itself well to becoming updated to a spiritual warrior society. It has inherent social

---

House of Justice dated 29 December 2015 for an explanation of the three milestones that mark the progress of clusters through various stages of development.

assets in the qualities of a people who progressed with a balance between the male and the female, a harmony consciously developed within their societal framework. Navajo people maintain an understanding of the spiritual nature of man and the illusory nature of this world. However, day by day the lamps of knowledge among the Navajo are put out by the intentional and unintentional forces of the old world order.

When the barrier between science and religion is removed and the unity of mankind established, what will remain of Indigenous peoples? On that day, what will remain of our sacred Mother Earth, the source of all life? The Great Creator, known by many different names throughout history, has placed in our hands the power to contribute to building a new world in this Formative Age of the Bahá'í Faith.<sup>10</sup> If we do not arise to serve mankind now, when will we? What are we waiting for? All of humanity must be part of

---

10 "In disclosing the panoramic vision of the unfoldment of the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh, Shoghi Effendi refers to three major evolutionary stages through which the Faith must pass—the Apostolic or Heroic Age (1844-1921) associated with the Central Figures of the Faith; the Formative or Transitional Age (1921- ), the 'hallmark' of which is the rise and establishment of the Administrative Order, based on the execution of the provisions of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament; and, the Golden Age which will represent the 'consummation of this glorious Dispensation'" (The Universal House of Justice, "The Epochs of the Formative Age").

this conversation and invited to be part of our progress moving forward. We all must ask ourselves: When the history of mankind is told and the chapter of the Indigenous people is written, what will have been our contribution?

#### WORKS CITED

- 'Abdu'l-Bahá. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988.
- . *Tablets of the Divine Plan*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1993. Print.
- Bahá'u'lláh. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990.
- . *The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh*. Trans. Shoghi Effendi. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985. Print.
- Covey, Linda. "Diné Becoming Bahá'í: Through the Lens of Ancient Prophecies." MA thesis. Missouri State University, 2011. Print.
- Horwitz, Sari. "The hard lives—and high suicide rate—of Native American children on reservations." *The Washington Post*, 9 March 2014. Web. 29 Sep. 2016.
- Shoghi Effendi. *Citadel of Faith: Messages to America 1947-1957*. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980. Print.
- The Universal House of Justice. *Ridván Message*, 2008.
- . "The Epochs of the Formative Age." Document enclosed with letter to all National Spiritual Assemblies, 5 February 1986.
- Zolbrod, Paul G. *Diné bahané: The Navajo Creation Story*. Albuquerque, NM: U of New Mexico P, 1984.

# Biographical Notes

JOYCE BALDWIN was the first Tsimshian to enroll in the Bahá'í Faith (1956) in Ketchikan, Alaska. She earned her B.A. from Antioch University while working on the Muckleshoot Reservation (Washington) and holds a diploma from the Professional Career Development Institute. Joyce learned the Tsimshian songs and dances in the Shimalgyk language and has performed the Tsimshian Peace Dance for the Shawnee Oklahoma Peace Fellowship and for Unity Works in Washington. Joyce wishes to express her gratitude to the pioneers of the Ten Year Crusade who came to Alaska and raised the banner of the Faith in those "vast and spacious lands" ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets* 7:22).

LINDA S. COVEY is of Cherokee/Southern Cheyenne/German heritage. She has been highly active in her Native culture for many years, serving in various capacities. Linda holds major and minor degrees in religious studies, psychology, anthropology, and journalism from Missouri State University, including a master's in religious studies. She holds doctoral work in clinical psychology from Forest Institute of Professional Psychology, Springfield, MO. She was a pioneer to China 2009-2014, where she taught psychology, and religion and human culture. She has been a Bahá'í for forty-six years.

Linda, a great-grandmother, currently resides in Fort Lauderdale, FL.

CHELSEA HORTON holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of British Columbia (UBC). Her doctoral dissertation, from which her article in this issue is drawn, is a study of Indigenous Bahá'í history in North America. Chelsea has taught Indigenous and Canadian histories at UBC and is currently a research consultant working with Indigenous communities in British Columbia. She is the co-editor of the recent interdisciplinary collection, *Mixed Blessings: Indigenous Encounters with Christianity in Canada* (UBC Press, 2016).

ALFRED KAHN JR.: Son of Tina and Alfred Lee Kahn, Alfred is Osage People of the Middle Water on his mother's side and born for Navajo Bit'ahnii clan on his father's. He delivered a speech at the White House as a "Coming Up Taller" award recipient in 1997, and in 2000 ran for race unity by taking part in the Spirit Run from Seattle to New York. Alfred currently lives in Albuquerque with his wife Stephanie and their daughters Chloe and Katerina, practicing architecture and teaching at the University of New Mexico. He also animates junior youth groups in South Valley and at the Isleta Pueblo reservation.

RICHARD SHORTY was born in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, in 1959 and belongs to Northern Tutchone Tribe. Richard is a self-taught artist.

In the early 1980's, he started painting West Coast Native design and soon developed his own distinct style, using the wildlife form of the animal and adding his native design inside of the form. Over the years, Richard has moved around—Vancouver Island, Richmond, Whitehorse, always returning to Vancouver. Today, he is one of the most sought after Native artists, with works in many galleries and collections worldwide. He is very versatile, working on drums, paddles, masks, rattles in addition to his paintings.

PATRICIA VERGE is a writer and editor who lives in Cochrane, Alberta, in the foothills of the Rocky Mountains. She is the author of *Angus: From the Heart: The Life of Counsellor Angus Cowan* and the forthcoming *Equals and Partners: A Spiritual Journey Towards Reconciliation and Oneness, Wazin Íchin-abi*. She is also the co-author, with Evelyn Loft Watts, of *Return to Tyendinaga: The Story of Jim and Melba Loft, Bahá'í Pioneers*.