LEARNING ABOUT GROWTH: THE STORY OF THE RUHI INSTITUTE AND LARGE-SCALE EXPANSION OF THE BAHÁ’Í FAITH IN COLOMBIA

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What a privilege and pleasure it is to have become acquainted with Learning about Growth: The Story of the Ruhi Institute and Large-Scale Expansion of the Bahá’í Faith in Colombia, a book that is effortless to read because of the simplicity of its style and the quality of the writing. But do not be deceived; it is a compelling book that requires the reader to ponder deeply the lessons it offers from the fruits of the creative and dedicated efforts of the Bahá’ís of Colombia. The description of more than twenty years in the development of the Bahá’í community of Colombia is a study of contemporary Bahá’í history, a study rich in the type of analysis one would find in a sociological, psychological, or anthropological exploration of a community’s development. It is generous in the detail of its description of the process of creating a living educational curriculum that guides this development. An unsuspecting reader might be drawn into this account, believing that the authors are taking a dispassionate look at an academic analysis of an approach to teaching the Bahá’í Faith in a foreign setting. Readers soon find themselves nodding as they read, identifying with the stages of “crisis and victory” through which this community struggled, recognizing their own metamorphosis as teachers of the Bahá’í message and the universal stages through which most communities travel as they attempt to apply the Bahá’í teachings to the changes and exigencies of their communities.

Although the authors do not claim it to be, Learning about Growth is a study of “Bahá’í development” in its broadest sense: the development of a Bahá’í community’s common commitment to a common vision of national transformation, or, as stated by Bahá’u’lláh, “... 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...”1 Perhaps the reason for Colombia’s ability to achieve that transformation, and what may possibly be the greatest lesson of this book, was the willingness of the Colombian Bahá’ís to move beyond a basic agreement on goals and a tolerance of each other’s opinions, which the authors call a lower level of unity, to embrace a unified and long-term vision of teaching, which the authors call a higher level of unity.

It is important that this book be distinguished from accounts of missionary efforts by groups of devoted believers in a religious movement. The authors make clear that the Bahá’í approach to growth is not a "missionary activity focused on conversion; it is the process through which large numbers of people are empowered to arise and participate in the construction of a new World Order" (12).

*Learning about Growth* is also a study in the concepts, techniques, and attitudes that define Bahá’í scholarship and in the approaches for training a country’s masses in systematic strategies for becoming scholars. Through the example of the authors’ analyses and writing, and through the example of the educational program that was developed by the Ruhi Institute (and from which ample selections are presented to the reader), the approach becomes well defined: a community’s methodical formation of the conditions and strategies for growth built on the firm foundation of the Bahá’í teachings as the motivating force for all actions. Without labeling it scholarship, the authors demonstrate what Bahá’u’lláh exhorts Bahá’ís to do with his teachings: "...to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action."

One of the most satisfying aspects of reading this account is the manner in which the Bahá’í teachings are used. They are not interspersed throughout the text, selected and quoted out of context, as is sometimes the case so that the reader has an uncomfortable feeling that the writer is searching for support for personal theories. Instead, the authors of *Learning about Growth* present the full text of tablets and quotations from the Bahá’í writings in the beginning of each section, without interpreting them and without summarizing their meaning for the reader. The Writings are used to set the context for what is to come in the text, but the reader is entirely free to reflect upon them and to make his or her own decisions about their implications. This is not an undisciplined approach; it is one of respect for the reader’s abilities to pray, ponder, and apply what she or he is reading to personal learning and actions. This is the same approach used in the Ruhi Institute, where, according to the authors, the Writings are used as the foundation for all study, consultation, and action.

*Learning about Growth* is divided into three sections. The first section is an historical account chronicling the events in Colombia’s long-term commitment to growth and development. The second section describes the creation and development of the Ruhi Institute, a human resources institute that was and still is ground-breaking as a Bahá’í institution focused on the training of human resources. The third section presents a detailed description of the program and courses offered at the Ruhi Institute. This section is both a training manual for those interested in applying the Ruhi model to their needs and an educational text complete with lessons and strategies for implementing the Ruhi Institute courses.

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In the first section, the authors trace the early teaching efforts, similar to those in many parts of the world, where faith and enthusiasm, but little long-range planning, are the stimuli for engaging in expansion efforts. The Bahá’ís are full of expectations that by merely sharing the message of the coming of a new Messenger of God, they will transform the lives of the villagers and suddenly enable them to elect local spiritual assemblies, to manage the affairs of their local Bahá’í communities, and to contribute to the affairs of the national community. Large numbers of villagers were attracted to the Bahá’í Faith during this early period, and enthusiasm among the Bahá’í teachers was high. Yet, despite consistent efforts, the teachers were unable to maintain the level of enthusiasm and to motivate the new Bahá’ís to become active teachers themselves and to develop their own communities independently. Although discouraging, it was this unexpected response by the new village Bahá’ís that motivated the teachers to consult about their teaching methods and to conclude that the teaching process was “not a simple matter to be determined through the clash of differing opinions; it would have to be the object of a long learning process and approached systematically and with perseverance” (9).

It is significant that discussions and disagreements about teaching approaches remained a fundamental part of community life in Colombia. However, the commitment “to set aside all negative comments and concentrate only on opinions which, if divergent, nevertheless reflected genuine concern for the process of teaching among the masses” (3), appears to have protected this community from serious division and disunity. Throughout all the years of “crisis and victory,” which the authors depict as healthy, recurring stages in the development of any community, the Colombian Bahá’ís never allowed any issue to become the cause of disunity and dissension. This unity, the authors say, was what characterized large-scale expansion and consolidation in Colombia. “The most valuable lesson learned in this first experience in large-scale teaching was that, in order to move consistently from victory to victory, the community would have to seize in every crisis whatever opportunities would help it to become more unified” (3). It was by means of continual prayer, consultation, action, and reflection that this community maintained what the authors call a “remarkably strong consensus” (5).

From the first period of crisis emerged a pattern that consistently would mark the community’s actions as it moved through succeeding stages of development. Meetings called to reflect on immediate problems proved so beneficial that the community established regular consultative meetings to “explore the diverse elements of a more unified vision of teaching” (4). These early meetings of serious consultation produced a profound understanding and commitment that the vision of growth would not be based on the “brilliance of those who contributed to consultation, but [on] the light of guidance which emanates from the Writings of the Faith” (4). The community agreed that
success would not be attributable to individuals but rather would be a “gift from Bahá'u'lláh, in some way related to the intensity of their efforts and the spiritual quality of their endeavors” (10).

Although the community searched to establish a set prescription for teaching, it soon “became clear that such a quest was in vain and that the path to mass conversion would have to be pursued with constancy and discovered step by step” (9). As a result of their consultation, they determined it was the Bahá'í writings that would drive the process of growth, not the theories or pet notions of individuals. These Bahá'í teachers accepted that they would allow the process to guide them, not they to guide the process. They decided that they needed to commit themselves to “engage wholeheartedly in an intensive plan of action and an accompanying process of reflection and consultation” (10).

Although commitment and enthusiasm remained high as large numbers became Bahá'ís, there were still few who made the kinds of major changes in their own lives that would enable them to form strong cadres of teachers who would in turn assume responsibility for maintaining the momentum. As a result of their continuous consultation, reflection, and action, the Bahá'ís experimented with another approach, this time focusing on the quality and content of the message they were delivering. This new approach, again based on intensive consultation and planning, created among the teachers a high degree of “enthusiasm and an indescribable spirit of joy . . .” (17). What is noteworthy is that throughout all the periods characterized by significant growth and then a waning of participation and commitment, the teachers never questioned whether their vision was a correct one. Their conviction was firm that the Bahá'í message needed to be delivered; it was the way in which they delivered it that they questioned, modified, and applied in new, creative forms.

I will resist the impulse to tell the prospective reader about all the gems of understanding that await in this book. It is “must reading” for anyone who cares about the development of the Bahá'í Faith and about his or her role in that development. The book has universal appeal and application. While it will not prevent another community necessarily from experiencing the “crises and victories” that are a part of all growth processes, it will help to put these periods into a broader perspective and to prevent the discouragement that frequently arises when expectations are not met, as is the case when a community does not respond to the Bahá'í teachings in the way a teacher would hope.

Perhaps most invigorating about reading this account is the attitude and tone with which it is written—one of humility and awe. The book is written by travelers without a guidebook on a journey through an unknown land. The travelers recognize that they are participants in a mysterious, evolving process for which there are no prescriptions. This attitude is best summed up by a statement at the end of the account: “How does one speak of successes and failures of men and women who, cognizant of their utter weakness and
impotence, try to contribute, no matter how modestly, to a spiritual drama which only unfolds according to the all-pervading Will of God!" (69–70).

The participants in Colombia’s continuing drama recognize that the process of Bahá’í development, as careful and analytical as it must be, and as systematic as one wishes to make it, is essentially a mystical process. The unpredictability of the outcomes may be a blessing, however, protecting the participants from becoming consumed with a sense of personal accomplishment for something they are able to control. Colombia’s Bahá’ís, through crises and victories, are amply aware of the lessons to be learned and the blessings to be derived from an intensive commitment to a creative, unpredictable effort to transform their national community.

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