

# Gaining an Historical Perspective







Ruhi Institute

Book 9

# Gaining
# an Historical Perspective

Ruhi Institute

Books in the Series:

Below are the current titles in the series designed by the Ruhi Institute. The books are intended to be used as the main sequence of courses in a systematic effort to enhance the capacity of youth and adults to serve their communities. The Ruhi Institute is also developing a set of courses that branch out from the third book in the series for training Bahá'í children's class teachers, as well as another set from Book 5 for raising up animators of junior youth groups. These, too, are indicated in the list below. It should be noted that the list may undergo change as experience in the field advances, and additional titles will be added as a number of curricular elements under development reach the stage where they can be made widely available.

| | |
|---|---|
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# A Few Thoughts for the Tutor

This book, the ninth in the sequence of courses of the Ruhi Institute, is a close companion of the previous one. It builds on the understanding participants have gained of the power of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant, as the pivot of the oneness of humankind, to deepen their appreciation of the character and sacredness of the mission conferred on the Bahá'í community—the subject of the third unit here. This aim cannot be achieved in the absence of a proper historical perspective. Participants are therefore assisted, in the first unit, in placing God's latest Revelation in the context of the continuous unfoldment of that eternal Covenant He makes with every individual soul. They are then asked, in the second unit, to reflect on the vast potentialities latent in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, potentialities that are commensurate with the maturity of the entire body of humanity—the crowning stage in its development—and to trace the historical evolution of the Cause. It is hoped that, in going through the two books, one after the other, participants will be able to catch a glimpse of the Almighty's grand design for the redemption of His children and of the part the community of His Greatest Name is destined to play in the realization of His Will and purpose for the human race as a whole.

Within this overall structure, a concept central to the first unit is the knowledge of God, a knowledge that is interwoven with love for Him. Those serving as tutors should be aware that certain articles of faith provide the foundation for exploring the nature of this knowledge. Chief among them is the certitude that God's essence is unknowable. Although access to the reality of God is barred, He has, through His Manifestations—Who like perfect mirrors reflect His qualities—opened the path for us to learn of His attributes and of His Will and purpose for humankind. Without the words of these holy Beings, appointed by God to be His mouthpiece, it would be impossible, as stated by Bahá'u'lláh in numerous passages, to know God. It is with the aid of such passages and the clear explanations provided by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that we can see the fallacy of certain ideas one hears in this connection, some examples of which are outlined in the first exercise in Section 2.

Another article of faith, closely connected to the one mentioned above, concerns our belief in the existence of the human soul and the powers it possesses, powers which enable it to attain to the knowledge of God's Manifestations. Sections 4 to 7 assist participants in exploring how we should strengthen these powers and faculties and protect them from the fire of self and the idols of vain imaginings. However, before engaging in such an exploration, participants are asked in Section 3 to examine the nature of the language we employ to describe spiritual reality, including the faculties of the human soul. Here the tutor should ensure that sufficient time is given for them to reflect on the meaning and implications of the passage quoted from *Some Answered Questions*. Carrying out the exercises in that section should reinforce their understanding of the ideas presented, most notably that to describe "intelligible realities"—things which cannot be observed through the senses—we use words that refer to "sensible reality". Awareness of this important characteristic of language will prepare participants for their study of the Writings in the subsequent four sections, which draw on terms related to our physical senses and organs—"eye", "ear", "heart", "sight", "hearing"—in

describing powers and faculties of the human soul, realities that are not sensible but intelligible. It is through these powers that the soul perceives spiritual reality, recognizes the attributes of God, and appreciates their beauty.

In taking a group through the above sections, the tutor should realize that they have a particular objective in mind. Undoubtedly, advancing on the path of service has, in no small measure, strengthened spiritual faculties in each of the participants, and engagement in a systematic pattern of study, action, and reflection, which every course of the Ruhi Institute encourages, has contributed to the refinement of their power of understanding. These sections are intended to raise their consciousness further as to the purpose for which we have each been endowed with these latent powers and faculties and to the significance of nurturing them—this, in order to recognize God and mirror forth His beauty. Such a pronounced awareness will prove valuable as participants contemplate God's names and attributes—the focus of Sections 8 to 21. The passages quoted from the Writings in these sections are organized into two sets with mutually reinforcing aims. Those in the first set speak of God's attributes as they pertain to His unknowable reality, which transcends the grasp of any human being. Reading these passages and pondering on them, with the aid of the exercises provided, will help participants to appreciate that the influence of God's names and attributes permeates the entire creation and that without them—without His all-compelling power, His all-encompassing knowledge, His all-embracing love and generosity—nothing could ever exist.

As to the second set of passages, participants are guided, through their study, in considering how each of us should respond to the boundless blessings that flow from God's names and attributes. It is envisioned that meditating on the two sets of passages will generate in the heart of every participant both a profound sense of wonder at God's all-pervading attributes and an ardent desire to manifest those qualities that befit the station of a human being. These spiritual susceptibilities are inextricably intertwined, and the tutor should make sure that the interplay between them becomes clear to participants. A growing understanding, for example, of God's love—a love that binds together all things and breathes life into the world of humanity—elicits selfless love for His creatures from the innermost recesses of one's heart; a deepening feeling of awe at the power of the might of God, Who "doeth whatsoever He willeth, and ordaineth that which He pleaseth", gives rise to the acknowledgement of one's own utter powerlessness—a powerlessness that is beloved by Him and is the mainspring of spiritual power; an increasing appreciation of God's all-encompassing knowledge evokes in one's very soul the yearning to search for knowledge embedded in the Book of Creation and the Book of Revelation, the search itself demanding humility before God expressed in one's sincere humility towards His servants.

This reflection on God's attributes culminates with a brief explanation of His Greatest Name, revealed to humanity through Bahá'u'lláh, the latest divine Manifestation. It is hoped that Sections 8 to 21, taken as a whole, will instill in those who study them a longing to deepen continually their understanding of God's myriad names and attributes, so often mentioned in the Writings, and to manifest faithfully those spiritual qualities that should adorn one's inner and outer life and which safeguard the integrity of one's service to the Cause.

Since the essence of God is unknowable and His attributes can be apprehended only through His Manifestations, to the extent that human capacity allows, the remainder of the first unit examines several concepts essential to our understanding of the exalted station occupied by these sacred Beings. From the earliest courses in this sequence, participants begin to reflect on the concept of God's eternal Covenant—that binding agreement between God and His

servants whereby His boundless blessings reach them through the recognition of His Manifestations, Who are sent from age to age to guide humanity, and through adherence to the divine ordinances they reveal. Sections 22 through 26, which draw mainly on passages from Bahá'u'lláh's Book of Certitude—the Kitáb-i-Íqán—will deepen their understanding of a few fundamental concepts already integral to their thinking on this subject. Study of these sections will simultaneously serve to dispel certain familiar misconceptions that literal interpretation of Sacred Texts has engendered—for example, the idea that God has a physical existence, that He descends and ascends, or that He leaves and enters. A stainless mirror that perfectly reflects the rays of the sun, a phenomenon in the physical world, is used as a metaphor in the Writings to help us gain insight into a spiritual phenomenon which occurs with the advent of every divine Manifestation. These holy Beings, Who appear in the "noble form of the human temple", are the Primal Mirrors that reflect perfectly all the names and attributes of God. That they can offer no greater proof of the truth of their Missions than the proof their own Persons is a profound concept that participants are asked to contemplate in Section 22.

Sections 23 and 24 address a related significant concept: the twofold station of God's Manifestations. In the passage from the Kitáb-i-Íqán quoted in Section 23, Bahá'u'lláh describes the first station as that of their essential unity, and in the accompanying extract from *Some Answered Questions*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá expounds on this theme. He clarifies the inner meaning of the term "return" as it pertains to the appearance of successive Manifestations of God and explains, in the clearest language, that it refers not to the individuality of their Persons but to the identical attributes and perfections they all manifest. The second station relates to the distinct mission with which each Manifestation of God has been entrusted by the Almighty, as the passage in Section 24 indicates. Participants need to grasp that this distinction in the respective Missions of His Manifestations does not contradict their essential oneness. In fact, study of the next two sections, 25 and 26, should reinforce this idea in the minds of the participants as they reflect on the mysteries that enshroud the relationship between God and these sacred Beings and on the spiritual power and sovereignty that they each manifest despite the intense persecution that those in positions of authority inflict upon them.

The distinction among the Missions of the Manifestations of God is closely related to the principle of progressive revelation, which is briefly addressed in Section 27. The tutor, in taking a group through this section, should assist its members in identifying and gaining clarity on the main concepts in the selected passages. They need to grasp, for example, that the religion of God is one, yet it is continually renewed through the advent of successive Manifestations; that through each Manifestation a greater measure of divine guidance is vouchsafed to humanity; that there is no end to the revelation of God's Will and purpose for humankind; that the measure of guidance bestowed upon humanity in each age is commensurate with its increasing spiritual receptivity and growing capacity for social progress.

A deeper understanding of the concepts elaborated in this unit not only enhances our appreciation of the limitless bounties inherent in God's eternal Covenant but also intensifies our desire to fulfill the sacred responsibility we bear in this regard. Indeed, the unit concludes with this theme, reminding participants of the twin duties of recognition and obedience; of the love of God as the force that empowers us to obey His commandments; of the attributes required in the quest for knowledge and certitude; and, finally, of the true freedom that can be attained through faithfulness to the Covenant.

Having acquired insight into how the eternal Covenant has unfolded through successive ages, participants reflect, in the second unit, on the powers that God's latest Revelation has

released in this age of transition—a period which marks the passage of humanity from the stage of childhood to full maturity. That the continuous evolution in humankind's collective existence is akin to the spiritual and intellectual growth experienced by an individual in the different stages of life is the premise for this exploration. The first part of the unit, through Section 11, identifies certain tendencies that characterize the period of childhood and asks participants to recognize the manifestations of these same tendencies in the life of society and to give thought to what will supersede them as humanity moves towards maturity: What "new virtues and powers", what "new moral standards", what "new capacities" will replace the tendencies and habits that dominate the lives of entire societies held in the grip of crass materialism, the tenets of which mass media today is aggressively propagating? They, no doubt, should seek the answer to this question in the pearls of wisdom contained in Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and in the knowledge generated through the efforts of the Bahá'í community to apply His teachings to the life of society. Certain exercises, specifically those at the end of the earlier sections, are intended to guide them in reflecting on this question and on the crucial role played in this respect by the educational process at the heart of the training institute.

Two interrelated tendencies, or habits, are specifically highlighted: the tendency to think and act in extremes and the tendency to hold concepts, only partially and simplistically understood, in opposition to each other. To overcome the former, observing moderation is essential. In Sections 6 and 7, participants are invited to move beyond the common, and often superficial, understanding of the principle of moderation and to consider, in light of the writings of the Faith, its meaning and its far-reaching implications for the life of the individual and for the well-being of society.

Sections 8, 9, and 10 address the latter tendency. In going through these sections with participants, the tutor should recognize how the habit of reducing profound concepts and entire themes into a list of appealing phrases is nurtured both through educational systems and through the way communication technology and social media operate today. The guidance of the Universal House of Justice cited in Section 8 warns us against this habit, which can lead to the creation in our minds of dichotomies between what are, in essence, complementary facets of Bahá'í life. Exercises in that section should serve to strengthen in participants the capacity to describe the complementarity among the diverse elements of a program of growth, a concept which, the guidance from the House of Justice suggests, we should not allow to fall prey to dichotomous thinking. The argument offered in the above sections does not negate the existence of opposites but reasons that the tendency to create false dichotomies among things can cause us to overlook their interdependence and complementarity. If we are to avoid this tendency, we should be aware of how pervasive it is in our social environment. To this end, two examples are provided: the false dichotomy between heart and mind, discussed in Section 9, and between obedience and freedom, examined in Section 10.

Ultimately, it is expected that participants will see not only how the tendencies and habits that belong to the childhood of humanity are manifested in the social spaces into which they enter but also how the capacities being developed through the sequence of institute courses and their associated acts of service are transforming patterns of thought and action in their own individual lives and in the collective endeavors being carried out in their villages and neighborhoods.

Reflection on some of the attributes that should increasingly characterize humanity as it approaches its stage of maturity brings into focus the supreme Mission of Bahá'u'lláh: the

achievement of the "organic and spiritual unity of the whole body of nations". The oneness of humankind was a theme central to our deliberations, in Book 8, on the power of Baha'u'llah's Covenant. Here the discussion in Sections 12 through 15 draws to the attention of participants but a few ideas related to the irreplaceable role the growing Bahá'í community plays in hastening humanity towards its unification—the highest stage in the evolution of its collective life on earth. That we can simultaneously believe in the divine origin of all major religions and in the uniqueness of the laws, principles, and institutions that Bahá'u'lláh has established—that in fact there is no contradiction between the two—is the first idea clarified. The greatness of this Day, a subject addressed in the first unit of Book 4, and the nature of our commitment to the Faith are two other significant concepts that are discussed as participants ponder the heights towards which our thoughts and actions should rise in response to the splendor of the Cause we have espoused.

Acquiring a profound sense of history is essential to the identity of a community that is growing from strength to strength through the power of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant. Drawing on the writings of the Guardian and the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, a short narrative of historical time is articulated in Sections 17 through 20. For participants to be able to follow the narrative, they need to be familiar with the specific meanings assigned to terms such as "cycle", "dispensation", "era", "age", and "epoch" in this historical description. They will then be able to understand what it means that the "Bahá'í Era" is the first era in the Bahá'í Cycle, that it comprises three Ages—the Heroic, the Formative, and the Golden—and that each Age is further divided into a number of time periods, or epochs. While the clarification provided in these sections is important, their purpose is not merely to impart information and facts. In reading the selected passages, participants should be able, for example, to glean the spiritual significance of events associated with the Heroic Age and the energies thus released, energies that continue to propel the advancement of the Cause. Finally, contemplating the features of the epochs of the Formative Age, delineated in Section 19, should increase their awareness of where the community of the Greatest Name stands along the path of its development since the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and of the effort required to meet the exigencies of the historical moment.

Such awareness should be coupled with an understanding of the forces operating in society during this age of transition and the twofold process they have set in motion, a theme discussed in Sections 21 and 22. A tutor will want to ensure that the members of a group come to grasp both the constructive nature of the integrating process associated with the Faith and the destructive nature of the process of disintegration eroding the fabric of an old social order. It should particularly become clear to them that these two processes, each in its own way, are leading humanity towards its ultimate destiny. That the three participants in the upbuilding of the Order of Bahá'u'lláh—the individual, the community, and the institutions—are not unaffected by the destructive forces gathering momentum is an idea which requires reflection. What should become evident is that these three protagonists can counteract the effect of such forces by aligning themselves with the process of integration that the global Plans of the Faith are steadily propelling. As indicated, then, in Section 23, it is the vision of the future World Order that the Guardian so beautifully describes and towards the emergence of which our efforts are directed that energizes us. The Universal House of Justice encourages us to think of these efforts in terms of three broad areas of action: expansion and consolidation of the Faith, engagement in social action, and participation in the discourses of society. At the end of the unit, those studying it are reminded of the source from which our civilization-building endeavors continue to derive their impulse: the Tablets of the Divine Plan.

The third unit then examines the distinct character of the mission of the Bahá'í community—this, in the context of the understanding gained in the previous one of the current historical moment and the transformation in the life of humanity envisioned. The initial sections of the unit draw on the 2 March 2013 message of the Universal House of Justice to the friends in Iran regarding the posture held by Bahá'ís everywhere towards political activity. In explaining that the Bahá'í perspective on politics is inseparable from a particular conception of history, the passage quoted in Section 2 reinforces several of the ideas that were discussed at some length in the second unit, and participants are asked to give thought to what it means that the view of history expressed in the message underlies every endeavor pursued by the Bahá'í community. While the question does not admit an easy answer, it will be important for them to make an effort to explore it by identifying the differences they would expect to see in endeavors informed by the Bahá'í view of history and those undertaken in light of other conceptions of society and its evolution, even if they are not made explicit.

Over the next several sections, the unit focuses on the principle of the oneness of humankind, the hallmark of the age of maturity. Participants have already examined this principle to some extent in earlier courses. Here the analysis is extended to consider the profound implications it has for the life of society as a whole and for the endeavors of the Bahá'í community specifically.

Regarding the former, it is suggested that the principle cannot merely be equated with the type of cooperation fostered among people and nations. It must permeate all facets of organized life and effect a complete transformation in the very structure of society and in the essential relationships that sustain it. As such, the inadequacy of notions that currently shape these relationships must be recognized and effort made to reconceptualize them in light of the principle of the oneness of humankind. What this will demand is explored through the example of the relationship between human beings and nature, and participants are encouraged in the exercise in Section 3 to examine other essential relationships in a similar manner.

As for the latter, the message of the House of Justice explains that the endeavors of the Bahá'í community to contribute to the transformation required can best be viewed in two dimensions—that is, in terms of its own growth and development and its involvement in society at large. The message looks initially at the first, noting that the Bahá'í community is striving to establish a pattern of activity and the corresponding administrative structures that embody the principle of the oneness of humankind. Mentioning some of the convictions that underpin this principle, it highlights the long-term process of learning that the task of translating them into reality entails, a process to which the Bahá'í community has dedicated itself. Participants, as they go through Section 4, should be able, and indeed be encouraged, to describe how the convictions outlined in the message are expressed in the pattern of activity taking shape in their own village or neighborhood, or any other locality with which they might be familiar, and how these convictions are increasingly embodied in the corresponding administrative structures that channel the talents and energies of growing numbers of individuals in such settings. The extract from the message quoted in Section 5 enumerates some of the many questions that the process of learning, guided by the series of global Plans being pursued by the Bahá'í community, must address. While participants are asked to examine only two of these, the tutor should assist them in recognizing the complexity of the set of questions being explored. They need to understand that the nature of the questions we pose largely determines the nature of the learning process that will over time provide us with valuable insights. How "to enable contingents of men and women to break free from the confines of passivity and the chains of oppression in order to

engage in activities conducive to their spiritual, social, and intellectual development", for example, is not the type of question that lends itself to a formulaic learning approach.

A question central to the learning process, animated as it is by the principle of the oneness of humankind, concerns the relationships that bind the individual, the community, and the institutions of society. The passage from the 2 March message quoted in Section 6 suggests that relations among these three "actors on the stage of history who have been locked in a struggle for power throughout time" should reflect a vision of a future society which draws inspiration from the analogy provided by Bahá'u'lláh that compares the world to the human body. Careful reading of the passage should enable participants to see that certain foundational concepts which underlie how relationships among the three have historically been envisioned will have to be discarded or completely revised. In this connection, the notion of power, which, in its current formulation, is not only legitimized but deemed essential, is analyzed, and the need for a new conception of power as the basis for a new set of relationships corresponding to the age of maturity of humanity is highlighted.

The message of the Universal House of Justice then turns to the second dimension of the Bahá'í community's efforts to advance civilization, in which the principle of the oneness of humankind finds equal expression: its involvement in society at large. Section 7 addresses this theme, and the exercises there help participants recognize the consistency, in thought and action, that exists across all areas of endeavor in which the community is engaged. The passage quoted in Section 8 summarizes the essential elements of the framework that shapes the Bahá'í approach to politics and explains the reason for our refusal to participate in partisan politics. Study of the section should make clear that such a stance, far from resulting in aloofness from society, is a function of our adherence to the principle of the oneness of humankind, which enables us to act as builders of unity in every sphere of social life into which we enter.

The remainder of the unit is dedicated to the question posed in Section 9: "What are some of the salient features of the approach we are taking to respond to the demands of the sacred enterprise in which we are engaged?" Sections 10 through 22 identify certain of these features which, in alignment with guidance provided in the writings of the Faith, distinguish all that we do: showing forth sincere love for humanity derived from our love for God and His Manifestations, acting and thinking within an evolving framework defined by the global Plans, employing a scientific method, thinking in terms of process rather than isolated events, operating in a learning mode, building the capacity of the three protagonists of the Divine Plan, providing mutual support and encouragement, preserving continuity of action and avoiding freneticism, being methodical and systematic, maintaining focus and the discipline to prioritize, seeking higher and higher degrees of coherence and integration among areas of action, achieving greater and greater degrees of unity. While many of these features were discussed in the third unit of Book 8, the opportunity to reexamine them together here will enable participants to grasp the cohesion inherent in the community's approach to its endeavors. And as they study the above sections, they should be encouraged to describe how these features are increasingly manifested in the pattern of activity in their respective clusters.

The historical perspective one gains from the study of this book would be incomplete without an understanding that God's purpose for humankind is being realized through His Minor Plan and His Major Plan, a theme explored in the final section of the unit. In all our efforts to contribute, under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, to the emergence of the civilization envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh, we are participating in the Minor Plan of God, which "is clearly delineated, operates according to orderly and well-known processes, and has been

given to us to execute". Meanwhile, His Major Plan is associated with "turbulence and calamity and proceeds with apparent, random disorderliness" but is, in reality, propelling humanity towards unity and maturity. It is the conviction that the Will of God is operating through both Plans that keeps one's steps firm on the path of service.



# The Eternal Covenant

## Purpose

To gain insight into the Covenant
God has made with humanity never to abandon it
and to explore some of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings
regarding God and His Manifestations,
those sanctified Beings through Whom
the human soul can know its Creator

## SECTION 1

In the previous course in this sequence, we deepened our understanding of the power of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant, which lights the path towards the attainment of His ultimate purpose: the unification of humanity. In this book, we will strive to gain a more profound appreciation of His Revelation by placing it in the larger historical context of the unfoldment of God's eternal Covenant, in the first unit, and of the evolution of humanity from the stage of infancy to maturity, in the second. With such a heightened historical awareness, we will be able to examine in the third unit the sacred mission of the Bahá'í community.

The eternal Covenant lies at the heart of the relationship between God and humanity. To begin our exploration of this Covenant, as it is described in the Bahá'í writings, let us read the following passages and reflect on the purpose of our creation:

> **"I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee. I testify, at this moment, to my powerlessness and to Thy might, to my poverty and to Thy wealth.**
>
> **"There is none other God but Thee, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting."[1]**
>
> **"The purpose of God in creating man hath been, and will ever be, to enable him to know his Creator and to attain His Presence."[2]**
>
> **"Thou didst bring mankind into being to know Thee and to serve Thy Cause, that their station might thereby be elevated upon Thine earth and their souls be uplifted by virtue of the things Thou hast revealed in Thy Scriptures, Thy Books and Thy Tablets."[3]**

It is clear from the above quotations that the purpose of our lives is to know God and to worship Him. In the sections that follow, we will study a selection of passages from the Writings that will give us insight into what it means for us to know God. First, however, we should remember that knowledge of God is intimately connected to love for God; in fact, it is difficult to speak of one without calling to mind the other. As we examine the purpose of our lives, we should remain ever conscious that our relationship with God is one of love. The concept of the love of God has been present in all the books in this sequence, and we have often reflected on its all-pervasive influence. Still, before we begin our explorations here, you may wish to pause and think about some of the ways in which we show our love for God. In the space below, provide a few examples of how we express this love.

Now consult about the significance of the following quotation with the other members of your group:

> **"The essence of love is for man to turn his heart to the Beloved One, and sever himself from all else but Him, and desire naught save that which is the desire of his Lord."[4]**

## SECTION 2

It is a fundamental belief of every Bahá'í that the reality of God is unknowable. He is far above human understanding. His Exalted Being can never be praised adequately by the human tongue, and the human heart can never fathom His infinite mysteries. Any description, portrayal, or conception of God is but a product of human imagination. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains in *Some Answered Questions*:

> **"Know that the reality of the Divinity and the nature of the divine Essence is ineffable sanctity and absolute holiness; that is, it is exalted above and sanctified beyond every praise. All the attributes ascribed to the highest degrees of existence are, with regard to this station, mere imagination. The Invisible and Inaccessible can never be known; the absolute Essence can never be described. For the divine Essence is an all-encompassing reality, and all created things are encompassed. The all-encompassing must assuredly be greater than that which is encompassed, and thus the latter can in no wise discover the former or comprehend its reality. No matter how far human minds may advance, even attaining the highest degree of human comprehension, the uttermost limit of this comprehension is to behold the signs and attributes of God in the world of creation and not in the realm of Divinity. For the essence and the attributes of the all-glorious Lord are enshrined in the inaccessible heights of sanctity, and human minds and understandings will never find a path to that station. 'The way is barred, and all seeking rejected.'**
>
> **"It is evident that whatsoever man understands is a consequence of his existence, and that man is a sign of the All-Merciful: How then can the consequence of the sign encompass the Creator of the sign? That is, how can human understanding, which is a consequence of man's existence, comprehend God? Thus the reality of the Divinity lies hidden from all understanding and is concealed from the minds of all men, and to ascend to that station is in no wise possible."[5]**

To think about the implications of the above excerpt, look at the sentences below. Can any one of them be true?

_____ Through a lifetime of prayer and meditation, living in isolation from the things of this material world, we can become more and more spiritual and eventually understand the essence of God.

_____ God exists in nature—in the air, the sun, the plants, and the animals; by connecting with nature, we come to know the reality of God.

_____ God is unknowable because He exists in everything in the universe, and no human mind can comprehend the universe in its entirety.

_____ From time to time God descends from on high, taking on human form and living among us.

_____ Since we can never really know God, it means that we can each make Him Whoever we need Him to be.

_____ We cannot know God until we pass into the next world, where we will meet Him and reside with Him forever.

_____ God resides in each one of us; we will comprehend His essence when we look inside ourselves.

If the reality of God is unknowable, what does it mean, then, to know God? To explore this essential concept, reflect on the explanation that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá provides:

> **“. . . in this connection, every statement and explanation is deficient, every description and characterization is unworthy, every conception is unfounded, and every attempt to contemplate its depths is futile. Yet for that Essence of essences, that Truth of truths, that Mystery of mysteries, there are splendors, effulgences, manifestations, and appearances in the world of existence. The Daysprings of those effulgences, the Dawning-places of those revelations, and the Sources of those manifestations are those Exponents of holiness, those universal Realities and divine Beings Who are the true mirrors of the sanctified Essence of the Divinity. All the perfections, bounties, and splendors of the one true God are plainly visible in the realities of His Holy Manifestations, even as the light of the sun is fully reflected with all its perfections and bounties in a clear and spotless mirror.”**[6]

What are some of the insights we gain into the nature of our knowledge of God from the analogy drawn from the relationship between the sun and a “clear and spotless mirror”?

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It is only through knowledge of “His Holy Manifestations” then that we can gain knowledge of the attributes of God—attributes such as His all-embracing knowledge, His infinite wisdom, His limitless love, His absolute justice, His boundless mercy, His sovereign might, His transcendent glory. Their Words open our sight to God’s “splendors”, “effulgences”, “manifestations”, and “appearances” in the “world of existence”, giving us the language to contemplate the signs of His attributes in every created thing. In the volume *Prayers and Meditations by Bahá’u’lláh*, the Guardian has compiled a selection of verses in which we can lose ourselves in hours of such reflection. Below is a passage from that volume. You are encouraged to read it with the other participants in your group today, though later you may wish to find a moment, alone, to meditate on it.

**"I am well aware, O my Lord, that I have been so carried away by the clear tokens of Thy loving-kindness, and so completely inebriated with the wine of Thine utterance, that whatever I behold I readily discover that it maketh Thee known unto me, and it remindeth me of Thy signs, and of Thy tokens, and of Thy testimonies. By Thy glory! Every time I lift up mine eyes unto Thy heaven, I call to mind Thy highness and Thy loftiness, and Thine incomparable glory and greatness; and every time I turn my gaze to Thine earth, I am made to recognize the evidences of Thy power and the tokens of Thy bounty. And when I behold the sea, I find that it speaketh to me of Thy majesty, and of the potency of Thy might, and of Thy sovereignty and Thy grandeur. And at whatever time I contemplate the mountains, I am led to discover the ensigns of Thy victory and the standards of Thine omnipotence.**

**"I swear by Thy might, O Thou in Whose grasp are the reins of all mankind, and the destinies of the nations! I am so inflamed by my love for Thee, and so inebriated with the wine of Thy oneness, that I can hear from the whisper of the winds the sound of Thy glorification and praise, and can recognize in the murmur of the waters the voice that proclaimeth Thy virtues and Thine attributes, and can apprehend from the rustling of the leaves the mysteries that have been irrevocably ordained by Thee in Thy realm.**

**"Glorified art Thou, O God of all names and Creator of the heavens! I render Thee thanks that Thou hast made known unto Thy servants this Day whereon the river that is life indeed hath flowed forth from the fingers of Thy bounty, and the springtime of Thy revelation and Thy presence hath appeared through Thy manifestation unto all who are in Thy heaven and all who are on Thy earth."**[7]

## SECTION 3

The quotations we studied in the previous section clearly indicate that it is impossible for us to know the reality, or essence, of God. What we can do is to gain more and more understanding of His attributes as revealed to us by His Manifestations and learn to recognize His signs in creation. In this connection, 'Abdu'l-Bahá elaborates further:

**"Knowing God, therefore, means the comprehension and knowledge of His attributes and not of His Reality. And even this knowledge of His attributes extends only so far as human power and capacity permit, and remains wholly inadequate."**[8]

A question we must ask ourselves, then, is how we can constantly strengthen our capacity to discern the attributes of God. Of course, having created us to know Him and to worship Him, God has given each of us the faculties and powers necessary to fulfill this purpose. However, spiritual faculties bestowed upon us must be developed, protected, and used for that which God intended, a theme we will explore in the next few sections. Since the Writings employ words referring to the physical world to describe spiritual aspects of existence, it would be beneficial to reflect first on the way that dimension of reality is often expressed. In this connection, 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that "human knowledge is of two kinds". He then goes on to explain:

**"One is the knowledge acquired through the senses. That which the eye, the ear, or the senses of smell, taste, or touch can perceive is called 'sensible'. For example, the sun is sensible, as it can be seen. Likewise, sounds are sensible, as the ear can hear them; odors, as they can be inhaled and perceived by the sense of smell; foods, as the palate can perceive their sweetness, sourness, bitterness, or saltiness; heat and cold, as the sense of touch can perceive them. These are called sensible realities.**

**"The other kind of human knowledge is that of intelligible things; that is, it consists of intelligible realities which have no outward form or place and which are not sensible. For example, the power of the mind is not sensible, nor are any of the human attributes: These are intelligible realities. Love, likewise, is an intelligible and not a sensible reality. For the ear does not hear these realities, the eye does not see them, the smell does not sense them, the taste does not detect them, the touch does not perceive them. Even the ether, the forces of which are said in natural philosophy to be heat, light, electricity, and magnetism, is an intelligible and not a sensible reality. Likewise, nature itself is an intelligible and not a sensible reality; the human spirit is an intelligible and not a sensible reality.**

**"But when you undertake to express these intelligible realities, you have no recourse but to cast them in the mold of the sensible, for outwardly there is nothing beyond the sensible. Thus, when you wish to express the reality of the spirit and its conditions and degrees, you are obliged to describe them in terms of sensible things, since outwardly there exists nothing but the sensible. For example, grief and happiness are intelligible things, but when you wish to express these spiritual conditions you say, 'My heart became heavy', or 'My heart was uplifted', although one's heart is not literally made heavy or lifted up. Rather, it is a spiritual or intelligible condition, the expression of which requires the use of sensible terms. Another example is when you say, 'So-and-so has greatly advanced', although he has remained in the same place, or 'So-and-so has a high position', whereas, like everyone else, he continues to walk upon the earth. This elevation and advancement are spiritual conditions and intelligible realities, but to express them you must use sensible terms, since outwardly there is nothing beyond the sensible.**

**"To cite another example, knowledge is figuratively described as light, and ignorance as darkness. But reflect: Is knowledge sensible light or ignorance sensible darkness? Certainly not. These are only intelligible conditions, but when you wish to express them outwardly you call knowledge light and ignorance darkness and say, 'My heart was dark and it became illumined.' Now, the light of knowledge and the darkness of ignorance are intelligible realities, not sensible ones, but when we seek to express them outwardly, we are obliged to give them a sensible form."**[9]

Answer the following questions in light of the above passage:

a. What are the two kinds of human knowledge described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá? _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

b. What are some examples of intelligible realities provided by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá? ____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

c. How, according to the passage, can we express intelligible realities? _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

d. What are some examples provided in the passage of sensible terms used to express spiritual conditions and intelligible realities? _____

_____

_____

_____

Now try to write a few sentences, each of which explains an intellectual or spiritual reality by using words that refer to things perceivable through the senses.

a. _____

_____

_____

b. _____

_____

_____

c. _____

_____

_____

## SECTION 4

The capacity to perceive and describe spiritual reality, alluded to in the previous section, is dependent on sharpening certain powers of the human soul. Let us begin to explore

some of these powers that enable us to perceive the attributes of God. Among them is one to which we can refer as "inner sight".

**". . . observe all the things which God hath created at His behest with the eye of the spirit, even as ye see things with the eyes of your bodies."[10]**

**"Therefore, we must thank God that He has created for us both material blessings and spiritual bestowals. He has given us material gifts and spiritual graces, outer sight to view the lights of the sun and inner vision by which we may perceive the glory of God."[11]**

**"They whose eyes are illumined with the light of understanding will perceive the sweet savors of the All-Merciful, and will embrace His truth. These are they who are truly sincere."[12]**

**". . . were man to gaze with the eye of divine and spiritual discernment, he will readily recognize that nothing whatsoever can exist without the revelation of the splendor of God, the ideal King."[13]**

**"With fixed and steady gaze, born of the unerring eye of God, scan for a while the horizon of divine knowledge, and contemplate those words of perfection which the Eternal hath revealed, that haply the mysteries of divine wisdom, hidden ere now beneath the veil of glory and treasured within the tabernacle of His grace, may be made manifest unto you."[14]**

1. Give some examples of things we are able to see when we observe God's creation with the "eye of the spirit":

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

2. Why is making a list of things we see with the "eye of the spirit" more challenging than thinking of what we can see with our physical eyes? _____

   _____

   _____

3. For what purpose has God given us inner vision? _____

   _____

4. Complete the following sentences on the basis of the above passages:

   a. If our eyes are illumined with the light of understanding, we will _____ _____ , and will _____ _____ .

b. If we were to gaze with the eye of divine and spiritual discernment, we would readily recognize _____
_____
_____ .

c. With fixed and steady gaze, born of the unerring eye of God, we should scan _____ , and contemplate _____
_____ .

d. If we scan for a while the horizon of divine knowledge with fixed and steady gaze, born of the unerring eye of God, and contemplate those words of perfection which the Eternal has revealed, _____
_____
_____ , will be made manifest unto us.

5. How do we develop our inner sight? _____
_____

6. Are some people born without the capacity to see with their inner eyes? _____

7. Describe some of your sentiments when, with your physical sight, you see beauty in nature.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

8. Describe some of your sentiments when, with your inner eye, you behold spiritual beauty.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

9. How does developing inner sight protect us from being attracted to the baser things of life? _____
_____

10. As we increasingly sharpen our inner sight, we perceive reality around us with greater and greater clarity. The way we look at events and circumstances changes. Read through the list below.

_____ In a world where more and more young people are being seduced by its allurements and drawn into its short-lived excitements, we encounter groups of youth—still few but growing in number—responding with vigor and determination to the call of the Universal House of Justice to serve their communities.

_____ In a country torn by strife, we enter a neighborhood or village where the institute process is being established and Bahá'í activities are taking root, and there is a willingness on the part of more and more of its inhabitants to participate in the process of community building set in motion by these activities.

_____ In a culture where people are encouraged to boast about what they have achieved, we find in the Bahá'í community people working shoulder to shoulder and taking joy in the accomplishments of those around them.

_____ In a world where we are faced with the magnitude of the forces of disintegration, whose operation is evident in so much of the turmoil and devastation around us, we encounter people who are willing to arise and lend their assistance to building a better world.

Now, what are some of the things we see when we gaze on each of the above situations with the eye of the spirit? Some possibilities are given below, listed (a) through (j). Match them to the situations, bearing in mind that some may be applicable to more than one.

a. We catch a glimpse of the spiritual susceptibilities of a population.

b. We see some of the implications of the principle of the oneness of humankind.

c. We see how gracefully and wisely the Universal House of Justice is harnessing energies into a global enterprise.

d. While never losing sight of the pain and suffering of humanity, we see barriers that block its progress being swept away and space being created for the process of integration to draw diverse groups together in cooperation and collaboration.

e. We see some of the implications of a humble posture of learning.

f. We catch a glimpse of the vision of the Universal House of Justice for the Bahá'í community.

g. We perceive receptivity to the message of Bahá'u'lláh.

h. We catch a glimpse of the capacity of the Faith to raise up a "new race of men".

i. We see a population striving to resist the forces of oppression and beginning to take charge of its own material and spiritual development.

j. We see the immense potential of youth to contribute to the advancement of society.

## SECTION 5

We can now consider another of the spiritual powers we possess—the power that enables us to hear the Voice of God. We can refer to this power as "inner hearing".

**"He has designed the outer ear to enjoy the melodies of sound and the inner hearing wherewith we may hear the voice of our Creator."**[15]

**"Purify your ears that they may hearken unto the Voice of God. By God! It is even as fire that consumeth the veils, and as water that washeth the souls of all who are in the universe."**[16]

**"Wert thou to incline thine inner ear unto all created things, thou wouldst hear: 'The Ancient of Days is come in His great glory!'"**[17]

**"We have bestowed a dewdrop from the ocean of divine grace; would that men might drink therefrom! We have brought a trace of the sweet melodies of the Beloved; would that men might hearken with their inner ear! Soar upon the wings of joy in the atmosphere of the love of God."**[18]

**"If thou truly givest ear to that which hath been revealed for thee from My Supreme Pen at this moment, thou shalt soar with the wings of eagerness in the heaven of love for the Lord of the Day of the Covenant, and wilt say during all the days of thy life: Thanks be unto Thee, O Thou the Desire of the world, and praise be unto Thee, O Thou the Beloved of the people of understanding."**[19]

1. For what purpose has God given us inner hearing? _____

   _____

2. What would we hear if we were to incline our inner ear towards all created things?

   _____

3. Complete each of the following sentences on the basis of the above quotations:

   a. We should purify our ears, that we may listen to the _____ .

   b. The Voice of God can be likened to a _____ that _____ _____ and to _____ that _____ of all who are in the _____ .

   c. A _____ of the _____ of the Beloved has been brought forth, that we may _____ with our _____ .

   d. If we truly give ear to that which has been revealed for us from the Supreme Pen, we would soar _____

      _____

      and would say _____

_____

_____

_____ .

4. Discuss in your group what it means to hear the voice of the Manifestation of God, and write down some of your thoughts.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. Why do some people ignore the counsels and admonitions of the Manifestation of God?

_____

_____

6. Describe some of your sentiments when, with your physical ear, you hear a beautiful melody.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

7. Describe some of your sentiments when you read references in the Writings to divine melodies, as in the opening passage of the Tablet of Aḥmad quoted below.

**"Lo, the Nightingale of Paradise singeth upon the twigs of the Tree of Eternity, with holy and sweet melodies, proclaiming to the sincere ones the glad tidings of the nearness of God, calling the believers in the Divine Unity to the court of the Presence of the Generous One, informing the severed ones of the message which hath been revealed by God, the King, the Glorious, the Peerless, guiding the lovers to the seat of sanctity and to this resplendent Beauty."[20]**

_____

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## SECTION 6

Another spiritual faculty with which we are each endowed is referred to as the "heart". Like the physical heart, which may be considered the seat of life, it is the seat of the love of God and the center of true understanding.

> **"The spirit that animateth the human heart is the knowledge of God, and its truest adorning is the recognition of the truth that 'He doeth whatsoever He willeth, and ordaineth that which He pleaseth.'"[21]**

> **"Should there be ignited in thy heart the burning brand of the love of God, thou wouldst seek neither rest nor composure, neither laughter nor repose, but wouldst hasten to scale the highest summits in the realms of divine nearness, sanctity, and beauty."[22]**

> **"God willing, thou wilt consider the Cause of God with a keen eye, an illumined heart, and a dilated breast and wilt meditate thereupon, that haply thou mayest discover the pearls of the ocean of true understanding."[23]**

> **"Say, implore God to open to your hearts the portals of true understanding that ye may be apprised of that of which no one is apprised. Verily, He is the Giver, the Forgiving, the Compassionate."[24]**

> **". . . O brother! kindle with the oil of wisdom the lamp of the spirit within the innermost chamber of thy heart, and guard it with the globe of understanding . . ."[25]**

1. What spirit animates the human heart? _____

2. What does the "burning brand of the love of God" ignited in our hearts spur us to do?

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

3. How are we told we can discover the pearls of the ocean of true understanding? ____

   _____

   _____

4. What should we ask of God if we are to be apprised of that which others remain uninformed? _____

   _____

5. Answer the following questions on the basis of the fifth quotation above:

   a. What should we kindle within the "innermost chamber" of our hearts? _____

      _____

b. With what should we kindle the "lamp of the spirit" within the "innermost chamber" of our hearts? _____

_____

c. With what should we guard the "lamp of the spirit" kindled with the "oil of wisdom" within the "innermost chamber" of our hearts? _____

_____

6. Can you say a few words about how understanding guards the "lamp of the spirit"?

_____

_____

_____

_____

7. Meditate on the following prayer revealed by the Báb. Can we achieve true understanding without turning to God and supplicating Him to illumine our hearts with the light of His knowledge? Can our hearts be delivered from the fire of ignorance and selfish desire without His aid and assistance?

**"Grant, O my God, that I may not be reckoned among those whose ears are deaf, whose eyes are blind, whose tongues are speechless and whose hearts have failed to comprehend. Deliver me, O Lord, from the fire of ignorance and of selfish desire, suffer me to be admitted into the precincts of Thy transcendent mercy and send down upon me that which Thou hast ordained for Thy chosen ones. Potent art Thou to do what Thou willest. Verily, Thou art the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting."[26]**

## SECTION 7

In the previous three sections we looked at some of the spiritual faculties God has bestowed upon us to help us fulfill the purpose of our lives to know Him and to worship Him. We saw that the Writings use words like "eye", "ear", and "heart" to refer to the powers upon which we can draw in trying to perceive spiritual reality. However, we cannot think of our inner faculties in the same way that we think of our physical senses, each with a specific function. You remember our discussion in Section 3 that made clear the limits of human language, which leaves us with no recourse but to describe intellectual and spiritual reality, including the powers of the human soul, using words that refer to sensible things. Reflect, for instance, on the following quotation from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in which He speaks of a heart that "seeth" and a spirit that "heareth":

**"O thou possessor of a seeing heart! Although, materially speaking, thou art deprived of physical sight, yet, praise be to God, spiritual insight is thine. Thy heart seeth and thy spirit heareth. Bodily sight is subject to a thousand maladies and assuredly will ultimately be lost. Thus no importance should be attached to it.**

**But the sight of the heart is illumined. It discerneth and discovereth the divine Kingdom. It is everlasting and eternal."[27]**

Now read the following passage from Bahá'u'lláh's Writings and meditate on how the spiritual faculty of the human heart enables us to listen with our inner hearing:

**"Hearken with all thy heart unto the nightingale song of the Beloved, that perchance thou mayest abandon the habitation of self and desire and step into the placeless realm of eternal glory . . ."[28]**

Although we cannot fathom the inimitable nature of the faculties of the human soul, our awareness of their operation is essential. It is also important to recognize that these spiritual faculties work in harmony with the processes in which the human mind engages, through the instrumentality of the brain and the senses, to gather information. And just as we have to take care of our physical faculties so that they do not become impaired, so, too, must we protect and sharpen our spiritual faculties if they are to enable us to penetrate the mysteries of the universe and discern the attributes of God. The quotation below and the questions that follow will help you think about this matter.

**"Thine eye is My trust, suffer not the dust of vain desires to becloud its luster. Thine ear is a sign of My bounty, let not the tumult of unseemly motives turn it away from My Word that encompasseth all creation. Thine heart is My treasury, allow not the treacherous hand of self to rob thee of the pearls which I have treasured therein."[29]**

1. What does the "dust of vain desires" do to the luster of our inner eyes? _____

   _____

2. What does the "tumult of unseemly motives" do to our inner ear? _____

   _____

3. What does the "treacherous hand of self" do to the heart? _____

   _____

4. What are some examples of "vain desires" that becloud the luster of the inner eye? __

   _____

   _____

   _____

5. What are some examples of "unseemly motives" that distract the inner ear from listening to the Word of God? _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

6. What are some of the characteristics of a heart whose pearls have been robbed by the "treacherous hand of self"? _____

_____

_____

_____

Now discuss the following question in your group: How do we nurture our spiritual faculties so that they can assist us in recognizing the attributes of God and in appreciating their beauty? Below is some space to write down a few of the ideas you consider.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

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_____

It is suggested that you end this section by memorizing the following passage:

**"O Son of Dust! Blind thine eyes, that thou mayest behold My beauty; stop thine ears, that thou mayest hearken unto the sweet melody of My voice; empty thyself of all learning, that thou mayest partake of My knowledge; and sanctify thyself from riches, that thou mayest obtain a lasting share from the ocean of My eternal wealth. Blind thine eyes, that is, to all save My beauty; stop thine ears to all save My word; empty thyself of all learning save the knowledge of Me; that with a clear vision, a pure heart and an attentive ear thou mayest enter the court of My holiness."[30]**

## SECTION 8

As we continually polish the dust of self from the mirrors of our hearts and protect our inner faculties from vain imaginings, we are able to draw on their powers to gain greater and greater understanding of the attributes of God and to fulfill the purpose of our lives. In this and the next few sections, we will reflect on some of the names of God, selected from among the many we find in the Writings, names which tell us of His most exalted attributes: the All-Knowing and the All-Wise, the All-Loving and the Kind, the All-Bountiful and the Gracious, the Most Generous and the Giving, the All-Merciful and the Forgiving, the All-Powerful and the Almighty. For each such pair we will explore two sets of quotations. The first will provide us with insight into the attributes of God as they pertain to His unknowable Reality. The second

will help us to see how we manifest spiritual qualities that are a reflection of His names and attributes in our lives, particularly in our service to the Cause. Having undertaken this exploration, we will then ponder the significance of His name, the All-Glorious.

God is the All-Knowing, the All-Wise. His knowledge holds all things, while He Himself is beyond the understanding of any of His creatures.

> **"Nothing whatsoever escapeth Him. He knoweth the secrets both of the heavens and of the earth. His knowledge embraceth all things."[31]**

> **"It is evident and manifest unto every discerning observer that even as the light of the star fadeth before the effulgent splendor of the sun, so doth the luminary of earthly knowledge, of wisdom, and understanding vanish into nothingness when brought face to face with the resplendent glories of the Sun of Truth, the Daystar of divine enlightenment."[32]**

> **"Behold, how many are the mysteries that lie as yet unraveled within the tabernacle of the knowledge of God, and how numerous the gems of His wisdom that are still concealed in His inviolable treasuries! Shouldest thou ponder this in thine heart, thou wouldst realize that His handiwork knoweth neither beginning nor end."[33]**

> **"The All-Knowing Physician hath His finger on the pulse of mankind. He perceiveth the disease, and prescribeth, in His unerring wisdom, the remedy."[34]**

On the basis of the quotations above, you may wish to write a few sentences that refer to God, the All-Knowing, and to His knowledge and wisdom. An example is given to assist you.

a. God knows the secrets both of the heavens and of the earth.

b. _____

c. _____

d. _____

e. _____

f. _____

Now, with the above quotations in mind, try to write a few sentences that refer to some of the things God knows about every human being. Two examples are given to assist you.

a. Nothing escapes God; He knows the secrets concealed in our planet earth and the secrets hidden in our innermost hearts.

b. He knows the capacity of each human being.

c.

d.

e.

f.

g.

## SECTION 9

The Writings explain that the human capacity to discover the mysteries of the universe is but a sign of the attribute of God, the All-Knowing. When we allow His words to penetrate our hearts, and as we grow in certitude, we become illumined with the light of His knowledge.

**". . . the moment the word expressing My attribute 'The Omniscient' issueth forth from My mouth, every created thing will, according to its capacity and limitations, be invested with the power to unfold the knowledge of the most marvelous sciences, and will be empowered to manifest them in the course of time at the bidding of Him Who is the Almighty, the All-Knowing."[35]**

**"Sow the seeds of My divine wisdom in the pure soil of thy heart, and water them with the water of certitude, that the hyacinths of My knowledge and wisdom may spring up fresh and green in the sacred city of thy heart."[36]**

**"Knowledge is praiseworthy when it is coupled with ethical conduct and virtuous character; otherwise it is a deadly poison, a frightful danger."[37]**

**"Although to acquire the sciences and arts is the greatest glory of mankind, this is so only on condition that man's river flow into the mighty sea, and draw from God's ancient source His inspiration. When this cometh to pass, then every teacher is as a shoreless ocean, every pupil a prodigal fountain of knowledge. If, then, the pursuit of knowledge lead to the beauty of Him Who is the Object of all**

**Knowledge, how excellent that goal; but if not, a mere drop will perhaps shut a man off from flooding grace, for with learning cometh arrogance and pride, and it bringeth on error and indifference to God."[38]**

**"Make manifest in Thy lands humble and submissive souls, their faces illumined with the rays of guidance, severed from the world, extolling Thy Name, uttering Thy praise, and diffusing the fragrance of Thy holiness amongst mankind."[39]**

Much of what we know is acquired through the observation and study of the physical world around us. The source of our knowledge of spiritual reality is that which God reveals through His Manifestations. The Writings suggest that this is like reading two books, the Book of Creation and the Book of Revelation. The pursuit of knowledge is one of the noblest aims established by Bahá'u'lláh for individuals and for humanity as a whole. Yet we must be cautious in this regard. For in the same way that the acquisition of knowledge can become the cause of our glory and honor, it can also lead to our abasement if we allow ourselves to grow in pride. The seeker of knowledge must remain vigilant to tread the path of learning with the utmost humility.

Let us think about someone who, the more learned he becomes, realizes how little he knows. The humility this person feels before God is manifested in humility before His servants. He has no desire to advance himself over others, nor is there any trace of superiority in his heart. He seeks pearls of wisdom in the words of his fellow human beings, independent of their acquired learning. What counsels from the above quotations has this person taken to heart?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

## SECTION 10

God is the All-Loving, the Kind. His love is infinite and all-embracing. Indeed, the entire universe is held together by the force of His love. If it were to be withdrawn, even for the blink of an eye, all things would perish. By their very existence, all created things reflect His love.

**"Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity of My essence, I knew My love for thee; therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty."[40]**

**"Out of My loving-kindness, 'neath the shade of My mercy I nurtured thee, and guarded thee by the essence of My grace and favor. And My purpose in all this**

**was that thou mightest attain My everlasting dominion and become worthy of My invisible bestowals."[41]**

**"My love has made in thee its home, it cannot be concealed. My light is manifest to thee, it cannot be obscured."[42]**

**"All the atoms of the earth declare My love for thee."[43]**

**"Were it not for the love of God, the contingent world would be plunged in darkness. Were it not for the love of God, the hearts of men would be bereft of life and deprived of the stirrings of conscience."[44]**

**"His care and loving-kindness surge even as the eternal billows of the sea, and His blessings are continually showered from His eternal Kingdom."[45]**

**"The glance of His loving-kindness is all-encompassing, and His favors and bestowals are unfailing."[46]**

**"The world passeth away, and that which is everlasting is the love of God."[47]**

On the basis of the above quotations, write a few sentences that refer to God, the All-Loving, and to His love. One example is given to assist you.

a. God has created us out of His love.

b. _____

c. _____

d. _____

e. _____

f. _____

Reflect on how vital is the force of God's love for all, and write a few sentences that express your thoughts. Two examples are given as an assistance.

a. God's loving-kindness constantly surrounds us.

b. His love nurtures us.

c.

d.

e.

f.

g.

## SECTION 11

The entire universe is held together by the all-pervading love that emanates from God. Yet only the human being has the privilege of knowing this love, of loving Him consciously. With hearts longing to reach His presence, we turn towards God and seek His pleasure. And as we abandon our own desires and lose ourselves in His love, our words and actions become a reflection of our love for Him; we become more and more capable of expressing limitless love towards all of humanity.

**"For every one of you his paramount duty is to choose for himself that on which no other may infringe and none usurp from him. Such a thing—and to this the Almighty is My witness—is the love of God, could ye but perceive it."[48]**

**"Be ablaze as the fire, that ye may burn away the veils of heedlessness and set aglow, through the quickening energies of the love of God, the chilled and wayward heart."[49]**

**"If thou lovest Me, turn away from thyself; and if thou seekest My pleasure, regard not thine own; that thou mayest die in Me and I may eternally live in thee."[50]**

**"Whoso hath known Him shall soar in the immensity of His love, and shall be detached from the world and all that is therein."[51]**

**"Walk thou steadfastly in the love of God, and keep straight on in His Faith, and aid Him through the power of thine utterance."[52]**

**"Strive to become the manifestations of the love of God, the lamps of divine guidance shining amongst the kindreds of the earth with the light of love and concord."[53]**

**"Be thou a summoner to love, and be thou kind to all the human race. Love thou the children of men and share in their sorrows. . . . let thy face be bright with the fire of God's love. Rest thou not for a moment, seek thou to draw no easeful breath. Thus mayest thou become a sign and symbol of God's love, and a banner of His grace."[54]**

**"Be self-sacrificing in the path of God, and wing thy flight unto the heavens of the love of the Abhá Beauty, for any movement animated by love moveth from the periphery to the center, from space to the Daystar of the universe. Perchance thou deemest this to be difficult, but I tell thee that such cannot be the case, for when the motivating and guiding power is the divine force of magnetism it is possible, by its aid, to traverse time and space easily and swiftly."[55]**

The above quotations are filled with counsels indicating how our love for God shapes our state of being and our actions. For example, no one can infringe on or usurp from our hearts the love of God. Write similar statements based on the above counsels.

a. _____
_____

b. _____
_____

c. _____
_____

d. _____
_____

e. _____
_____

f. _____
_____

g. _____
_____

h. _____
_____

i. _____
_____

j. _____
_____

k. _____

_____

l. _____

_____

## SECTION 12

God is the All-Bountiful, the Gracious. All grace and bounty belong to Him. Every created thing exists in a state of total dependency on God's bounty, the wonders of which never cease. All things partake, each in accordance with its capacity, of the living waters of His limitless grace.

> **"God witnesseth that there is no God but Him, the Gracious, the Best-Beloved. All grace and bounty are His. To whomsoever He will He giveth whatsoever is His wish."[56]**

> **"No man can ever claim to have comprehended the nature of the hidden and manifold grace of God; none can fathom His all-embracing mercy."[57]**

> **"A drop of the billowing ocean of His endless mercy hath adorned all creation with the ornament of existence, and a breath wafted from His peerless Paradise hath invested all beings with the robe of His sanctity and glory. A sprinkling from the unfathomed deep of His sovereign and all-pervasive Will hath, out of utter nothingness, called into being a creation which is infinite in its range and deathless in its duration. The wonders of His bounty can never cease, and the stream of His merciful grace can never be arrested. The process of His creation hath had no beginning, and can have no end."[58]**

> **"God's grace is like the rain that cometh down from heaven: the water is not bounded by the limitations of form, yet on whatever place it poureth down, it taketh on limitations—dimensions, appearance, shape—according to the characteristics of that place. In a square pool, the water, previously unconfined, becometh a square . . . The rain itself hath no geometry, no limits, no form, but it taketh on one form or another, according to the restrictions of its vessel. In the same way, the Holy Essence of the Lord God is boundless, immeasurable, but His graces and splendors become finite in the creatures, because of their limitations . . ."[59]**

With the above quotations in mind, write a few sentences that refer to God, the All-Bountiful, and to His bounty and manifold grace, as in the example below.

a. All grace and bounty belong to God. _____

_____

b. _____

_____

c. _____

d. _____

e. _____

f. _____

All that we do—indeed, our very existence—is dependent on God's absolute bounty and His wondrous grace. Can you write a few sentences describing the ways in which God's grace exerts its powerful influence on our lives? These two examples may assist you.

a. God's grace sustains us.

b. The measure of divine grace that we receive is in proportion to the degree of our heart's yearning for God's love and knowledge.

c. _____

d. _____

e. _____

f. _____

g. _____

## SECTION 13

God's bounties are infinite and never ending. All grace flows from Him. He calls upon us to bestir ourselves and to take a portion from the ocean of His limitless grace, lest we deprive ourselves of all the bounties and blessings He has in store for us. We should not look at our own capacity, at our own weakness. Rather should we exert effort and place our trust in His all-

sustaining grace. Heavenly bounties will descend upon hearts that, undimmed by the veil of "self" and filled with His grace, are illumined by the light of His love.

> **"Seize ye, O loved ones of the All-Merciful, the chalice of eternal life proffered by the hand of the bountiful favors of your Lord, the Possessor of the entire creation, then drink ye deep therefrom."[60]**

> **"For the highest and most excelling grace bestowed upon men is the grace of 'attaining unto the Presence of God' and of His recognition, which has been promised unto all people. This is the utmost degree of grace vouchsafed unto man by the All-Bountiful, the Ancient of Days, and the fullness of His absolute bounty upon His creatures."[61]**

> **"Take thou thy portion of the ocean of His grace, and deprive not thyself of the things that lie hidden in its depths. Be thou of them that have partaken of its treasures. A dewdrop out of this ocean would, if shed upon all that are in the heavens and on the earth, suffice to enrich them with the bounty of God . . ."[62]**

> **"The whole duty of man in this Day is to attain that share of the flood of grace which God poureth forth for him. Let none, therefore, consider the largeness or smallness of the receptacle. The portion of some might lie in the palm of a man's hand, the portion of others might fill a cup, and of others even a gallon-measure."[63]**

> **"Rejoice in the grace of God and exult in the favors of thy Lord, the Compassionate, the Merciful."[64]**

> **"Grieve not if worldly possessions should pass from thy hands, for thy luminous heart is the greatest treasure, inasmuch as every heart that is confident in the grace of its Lord and is illumined by the light of its Creator is one of the treasures of the Kingdom, overflowing with heavenly riches and divine bounties. This is the greatest wealth!"[65]**

> **". . . there is no veil more obstructive than the self, and however tenuous that veil may be, at the last it will completely shut a person out, and deprive him of his portion of eternal grace."[66]**

As part of your reflections on the above quotations, you may find it helpful to write a few sentences that refer to our response to God's bounty and grace, each of which uses at least one the following phrases:

| | |
|---|---|
| the ocean of God's grace | the hand of God's bountiful favors |
| the flood of God's grace | confident in God's grace |
| God's eternal grace | recognition of God |
| the greatest wealth | the highest and most excelling grace |
| God's bounties | veil of self |

a. _____

_____

b. _____

_____

c. _____

_____

d. _____

_____

e. _____

_____

f. _____

_____

## SECTION 14

God is the Most Generous, the Giving. His generosity is limitless. Every created thing, by its very existence, is continually beseeching Him for His gifts and bountiful favors. He gives not according to the merits of His creatures but out of His infinite generosity. Among the many favors God has bestowed upon humanity, the greatest is the gift of understanding, that we might know Him and worship Him. Yet, His acceptance of any act or praise from us is, in itself, a sign of His generosity.

**"All existence is begotten by Thy bounty; deprive it not of the waters of Thy generosity, neither do Thou withhold it from the ocean of Thy mercy."[67]**

**"All creation and its empire are His. He bestoweth His gifts on whom He will, and from whom He will He withholdeth them. He is the Great Giver, the Most Generous, the Benevolent."[68]**

**". . . everything other than Thee is but Thy creation and is held in the hollow of Thy hand. To have accepted any act or praise from Thy creatures is but an evidence of the wonders of Thy grace and bountiful favors, and a manifestation of Thy generosity and providence."[69]**

**"From the billows of the ocean of Thy generosity the seas of eagerness and enthusiasm were revealed. Thou art what Thou art. Aught except Thee is unworthy of any mention unless it entereth beneath Thy shadow, and gaineth admittance into Thy court."[70]**

**"Know thou that, according to what thy Lord, the Lord of all men, hath decreed in His Book, the favors vouchsafed by Him unto mankind have been, and will ever**

**remain, limitless in their range. First and foremost among these favors, which the Almighty hath conferred upon man, is the gift of understanding. His purpose in conferring such a gift is none other except to enable His creature to know and recognize the one true God—exalted be His glory."[71]**

**"Verily thy Lord is the Generous, the All-Bountiful. He will bestow upon thee what will dilate thy breast, gladden thine eyes, and enrapture thee at all times and under all conditions."[72]**

**"Is there any giver save God? He singleth out for His mercy whomsoever He willeth. Erelong will He open before you the gates of His knowledge and fill up your hearts with His love. He will cheer your souls with the gentle winds of His holiness and make bright your faces with the splendors of His lights, and exalt the memory of you amongst all peoples. Your Lord is verily the Compassionate, the Merciful."[73]**

Write a few sentences which refer to God, the Most Generous, and to His generosity, as in the following example:

a. God bestows His gifts on whomsoever He wills.

b. _____

c. _____

d. _____

e. _____

f. _____

Reflect for a moment on the above quotations. What are some of the bounties and blessings that these passages suggest God will, from the heaven of His generosity, confer upon us? These two examples may assist you.

a. God will give us that which will gladden our eyes.

b. With the gentle winds of His holiness, He will cheer our souls.

c. _____

_____

d. _____

_____

e. _____

_____

f. _____

_____

g. _____

_____

## SECTION 15

God's gifts and favors are inexhaustible and everlasting, and we should seek to receive them with yearning souls. If we do not have thirst, we shall not take our portion of the life-giving waters He generously offers to every human being. If our souls do not hunger, we shall not partake of the heavenly food that He has laid out on the table of His generosity. We should remember that God's generosity has no bounds and that His gifts are limitless. And we should be content with His Will, with whatsoever He deems best for us. Such should be our gratitude to God that we spend our days in service to His loved ones, giving joyfully of ourselves. Yet we know that even the opportunity to serve is one of His gifts to us. There can be no limit, then, to our gratitude and thankfulness.

**"To give and to be generous are attributes of Mine; well is it with him that adorneth himself with My virtues."**[74]

**"Be ye the trustees of God amongst His creatures, and the emblems of His generosity amidst His people."**[75]

**"Be generous in prosperity, and thankful in adversity."**[76]

**"In prosperity, all praise is Thine, O Lord of the Worlds, and in its absence, all gratitude is Thine, O Desire of them that have recognized Thee!"**[77]

**"Place your confidence in the everlasting bounty, turn to the presence of the generous God; ask assistance from the kingdom of Abhá; seek confirmation from the Supreme World; turn thy vision to the horizon of eternal wealth; and pray for help from the Source of Mercy!"**[78]

**"Now, in gratitude for these infinite bestowals, it behooveth us to arise to carry out the counsels and admonitions of the Blessed Beauty, and to act in accordance with His teachings and ordinances. We must strive with heart and soul to drink a**

**brimful cup of this heavenly wine, that our words, our deeds, and our conduct may be those of the righteous."[79]**

**"Although we are weak and feeble, yet the bounties of the Blessed Beauty are boundless and inexhaustible. In offering gratitude, we have no recourse but to confess our own shortcomings, no remedy but to hold our peace, for we are powerless and wanting, feeble and faltering. Wherefore, praise be to the Lord of creation, through Whose bounty these helpless ants show forth the strength of Solomon, and these needy and feeble gnats become royal falcons of the heights of mystery, causing the bestowals of the Almighty to be manifested."[80]**

**"In this day, to thank God for His bounties consisteth in possessing a radiant heart, and a soul open to the promptings of the spirit. This is the essence of thanksgiving."[81]**

With longing hearts, we set our faces in the direction of God's gifts and favors, ever ready to receive whatsoever He chooses to confer upon us. The prayers revealed by the Central Figures of our Faith tell us of these gifts and provide us with the language we need to think about them. The exercises below may assist us in this connection. As you carry them out, remember some of the prayers you know by heart. You may also wish to refer to a prayer book.

1. One of the things for which we beseech God is strength. For example, we say: "Feeble are we, strengthen us", "Send down upon us Thy strength and power", "I am weak, strengthen me with Thy power and potency", "I entreat Thee . . . to strengthen me by Thy power which hath encompassed the heavens and the earth", "Strengthen Thou, O my Lord, the hearts of them that love Thee". For which of the following do we seek the gift of strength from God?

   _____ To carry out God's commandments
   _____ To obey Him
   _____ To dominate others
   _____ To withstand the onslaught of opposition
   _____ To be in control of every situation
   _____ To be steadfast in God's Faith
   _____ To aid God among His servants
   _____ To walk undeviatingly in the path of Truth
   _____ To serve God's loved ones
   _____ To be able to have our own way whenever we want
   _____ To demand that others follow what we think is right
   _____ To be steadfast in our love towards God
   _____ To convince others of our opinions
   _____ To exalt His Word
   _____ To observe that which God has ordained

_____ To achieve victory in the path of God

_____ To free ourselves from the onslaught of self and passion

2. Among God's gifts are sustenance, nourishment, health, and prosperity. In many prayers, we ask Him to bestow these gifts upon us. For example, we say: "Give us our daily bread, and grant Thine increase in the necessities of life", "Pitiful are we, grant us Thy favor; poor, bestow upon us a share from the ocean of Thy wealth", "We are needy; enrich and bless us from Thy boundless treasury", "I beg of Thee . . . to purge me with the waters of Thy bounty from every affliction and disorder, and from all weakness and feebleness". Write four sentences similar to the one given below.

a. We ask God for sustenance and nourishment so that we may be independent of all but Him.

b. _____

c. _____

d. _____

e. _____

3. We also constantly ask God for His aid and assistance. We say, for example: "O God, my God! . . . deprive me not of the wellsprings of Thine aid and favor", "Grant me then Thy sufficing help", "I beseech Thee to aid and assist me at all times and under all conditions", "O my Lord! Assist me with Thy triumphant and effective might", "Let Thy celestial aid surround those who love Thee". Indeed, it would be impossible for us to succeed in even the smallest of tasks without receiving a measure of His divine assistance. Below are some things for which we seek His aid. Mention a few others.

a. Winning His good-pleasure

b. Remaining steadfast

c. Having loving and tender hearts

d. Refuting what is vain and false

e. _____

f. _____

g. _____

h. _____

i. _____

j. _____

k. _____

l. _____

4. Confirmation is another gift for which we beseech God time and again. We say, for example: "Grant us heavenly confirmation. Bestow upon us the breath of the Holy

Spirit", "O our Lord! . . . assist us with the hosts of Thy supreme angels and confirm us through the holy ones of the Kingdom of Abhá", "Through the spirit of power confirm Thou me in Thy Cause, O my Best-Beloved", "O Lord! Confirm them in Thy servitude and assist them in Thy service". What are some of the occasions when we ask to be reinforced by God's confirmations? An example is given to assist you.

a. When teaching the Cause

b. _____

c. _____

d. _____

e. _____

f. _____

g. _____

5. The joy we feel in our heart is yet another gift of God for which we long. We say, for example: "Let my heart be dilated with joy through the spirit of confirmation from Thy kingdom", ". . . by the breezes of Thine eternity gladden me, O Thou Who art my God", "Cheer our hearts through the potency of Thy love and good-pleasure", "Render our souls joyous and happy through Thy glad tidings", ". . . gladden our bosoms with the signs of Thy divine unity". What are some of the gifts of God that fill our hearts with joy? An example is given to assist you.

a. Divine confirmation

b. _____

c. _____

d. _____

e. _____

f. _____

g. _____

To end this section, reflect on the following passage which you were encouraged to commit to memory in Book 1. You may wish to make sure that you know it by heart in its entirety.

**"O thou who art turning thy face towards God! Close thine eyes to all things else, and open them to the realm of the All-Glorious. Ask whatsoever thou wishest of Him alone; seek whatsoever thou seekest from Him alone. With a look He granteth a hundred thousand hopes, with a glance He healeth a hundred thousand incur-**

**able ills, with a nod He layeth balm on every wound, with a glimpse He freeth the hearts from the shackles of grief. He doeth as He doeth, and what recourse have we? He carrieth out His Will, He ordaineth what He pleaseth. Then better for thee to bow down thy head in submission, and put thy trust in the All-Merciful Lord."[82]**

## SECTION 16

God is the All-Merciful, the Forgiving. With a drop from the ocean of His endless mercy, He has adorned all of creation with existence. Nothing is hidden from Him. He is aware of the transgressions of His creatures. Yet, His mercy embraces us all. The waters of His forgiveness wash away every transgression.

**"All forgiveness floweth, in this Day, from God, Him to Whom none can compare, with Whom no partners can be joined, the Sovereign Protector of all men, and the Concealer of their sins!"[83]**

**"The tenderness of Thy mercy, O my Lord, surpasseth the fury of Thy wrath, and Thy loving-kindness exceedeth Thy hot displeasure, and Thy grace excelleth Thy justice. Hold Thou, through Thy wondrous favors and mercies, the hands of Thy creatures, and suffer them not to be separated from the grace which Thou hast ordained as the means whereby they can recognize Thee."[84]**

**"And whenever My name 'the Ever-Forgiving' perceived that anyone of My friends had committed any transgression, it cried out in its great distress, and, overcome with anguish, fell upon the dust, and was borne away by a company of the invisible angels to its habitation in the realms above."[85]**

**"His surpassing mercy hath restrained the fury of His wrath, and caused most people to imagine that the one true God is unaware of the things they have privily committed. By Him Who is the All-Knowing, the All-Informed! The mirror of His knowledge reflecteth, with complete distinctness, precision and fidelity, the doings of all men. Say: Praise be to Thee, O Concealer of the sins of the weak and helpless! Magnified be Thy name, O Thou that forgivest the heedless ones that trespass against Thee!"[86]**

**"My God, my God! If none be found to stray from Thy path, how, then, can the ensign of Thy mercy be unfurled, or the banner of Thy bountiful favor be hoisted? And if iniquity be not committed, what is it that can proclaim Thee to be the Concealer of men's sins, the Ever-Forgiving, the Omniscient, the All-Wise? May my soul be a sacrifice to the trespasses of them that trespass against Thee, for upon such trespasses are wafted the sweet savors of the tender mercies of Thy Name, the Compassionate, the All-Merciful. May my life be laid down for the transgressions of such as transgress against Thee, for through them the breath of Thy grace and the fragrance of Thy loving-kindness are made known and diffused amongst men. May my inmost being be offered up for the sins of them that have sinned against Thee, for it is as a result of such sins that the Daystar of Thy manifold favors revealeth itself above the horizon of Thy bounty, and the clouds**

**of Thy never-failing providence rain down their gifts upon the realities of all created things."**[87]

**"O Sun of Bounty, send down a shaft of light. Grant us pity, grant us grace. By Thy beauty, we come with no provision but our sins, with no good deeds to tell of, only hopes. Unless Thy concealing veil doth cover us, and Thy protection shield and cradle us, what power have these helpless souls to rise and serve Thee, what substance have these wretched ones to make a brave display?"**[88]

You are encouraged to write, on the basis of the above quotations, a few sentences which refer to God, the Forgiving, and to His mercy. An example is provided.

a. All forgiveness flows from God.

b. _____

c. _____

d. _____

e. _____

f. _____

Think about your life and the comfort you take in beseeching God, that He deal with you not according to His justice but with His tender mercy and compassion. What are some of the assurances and promises of forgiveness and mercy to which we all cling? In this light, try to write a few sentences similar to the two examples below.

a. God will conceal our sins.

b. He will forgive the gravest of errors.

c. _____

d. _____

e. _____

_____

f. _____

_____

g. _____

_____

## SECTION 17

It is a requirement of life to grow constantly in recognition of God's manifold bounties and in obedience to His commands. We are to take account of our deeds each day and strive to do better the next. We should realize that we are weak and prone to error but remember that, if we focus on our shortcomings, we will live in despair. We should fix our eyes on His name the Ever-Forgiving and cling to His unfailing mercy. And just as we look to Him for forgiveness, so, too, should we treat others with mercy and compassion.

**"Beware lest the fire of thy presumptuousness debar thee from attaining to God's Holy Court. Turn unto Him, and fear not because of thy deeds. He, in truth, forgiveth whomsoever He desireth as a bounty on His part; no God is there but Him, the Ever-Forgiving, the All-Bounteous."[89]**

**"Obstruct not the luminous spring of thy soul with the thorns and brambles of vain and inordinate affections, and impede not the flow of the living waters that stream from the fountain of thine heart. Set all thy hope in God, and cleave tenaciously to His unfailing mercy. Who else but Him can enrich the destitute, and deliver the fallen from his abasement?"[90]**

**"When the sinner findeth himself wholly detached and freed from all save God, he should beg forgiveness and pardon from Him. Confession of sins and transgressions before human beings is not permissible, as it hath never been nor will ever be conducive to divine forgiveness. Moreover such confession before people results in one's humiliation and abasement, and God—exalted be His glory—wisheth not the humiliation of His servants. Verily He is the Compassionate, the Merciful."[91]**

**". . . let your adorning be forgiveness and mercy and that which cheereth the hearts of the well-favored of God."[92]**

**"O ye friends of God! Make ye a mighty effort that all the peoples and kindreds of the world, even the enemies, should put their trust, confidence and hope in you. Should a soul commit a hundred thousand misdeeds, yet may he hope for forgiveness and may not become despondent or grieved."[93]**

**"O army of God! Beware lest ye harm any soul, or make any heart to sorrow; lest ye wound any man with your words, be he known to you or a stranger, be he friend**

**or foe. Pray ye for all; ask ye that all be blessed, all be forgiven. Beware, beware, lest any of you seek vengeance, even against one who is thirsting for your blood. Beware, beware, lest ye offend the feelings of another, even though he be an evil-doer, and he wish you ill. Look ye not upon the creatures, turn ye to their Creator. See ye not the never-yielding people, see but the Lord of Hosts. Gaze ye not down upon the dust, gaze upward at the shining sun, which hath caused every patch of darksome earth to glow with light."**[94]

**"There are two kinds of retributive actions: One is revenge and retaliation, and the other—punishment and requital. An individual has no right to seek revenge, but the body politic has the right to punish the criminal. Such punishment is intended to dissuade and deter others from committing similar crimes. It is for the protection of the rights of man and does not constitute revenge, for revenge is that inner gratification that results from returning like for like. This is not permissible, for no one has been given the right to seek revenge. And yet, if criminals were entirely left to their own devices, the order of the world would be disrupted. So while punishment is one of the essential requirements of the body politic, the wronged and aggrieved party has no right to seek revenge. On the contrary, he should show forgiveness and magnanimity, for this is that which befits the human world."**[95]

The counsels found in these passages have numerous implications for our individual and collective lives. Here you may wish merely to consider two questions in your group: How do the above passages suggest we should deal with our own shortcomings and errors, and what do they tell us about the way in which we should respond to the shortcomings and errors of others? In relation to the first question, try to address in your discussions concepts such as negligence, guilt, shame, remorse, humility, effort, and hope. With respect to the second, your discussions could touch upon ideas such as forgiveness and vengeance, compassion and a sin-covering eye. You may find it helpful to sum up your conclusions in the space below.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

It is suggested that you end your reflections on God's mercy and forgiveness by meditating on the prayer below revealed by the Báb. If you do not already know the prayer by heart, you may wish to take the opportunity to memorize it.

> **"I beg Thee to forgive me, O my Lord, for every mention but the mention of Thee, and for every praise but the praise of Thee, and for every delight but delight in Thy nearness, and for every pleasure but the pleasure of communion with Thee, and for every joy but the joy of Thy love and of Thy good-pleasure, and for all things pertaining unto me which bear no relationship unto Thee, O Thou Who art the Lord of lords, He Who provideth the means and unlocketh the doors."[96]**

## SECTION 18

God is the All-Powerful, the Almighty. He does whatever He wills, and His Will is all-embracing. It is in His power, should He so desire, to enable a speck of dust to generate suns of infinite splendor and a dewdrop to give rise to vast and limitless oceans. He issues the word "Be", and it is. So powerful is the Word of God that, through it, all of humanity can be brought together under the shade of one tree.

> **"He it is Who is now proclaiming from the realms above, and within the inmost essence of all created things: 'I truly am God, there is none other God but Me. I am He Who, from everlasting, hath been the Source of all sovereignty and power, He Who shall continue, throughout eternity, to exercise His kingship and to extend His protection unto all created things. My proof is the greatness of My might and My sovereignty that embraceth the whole of creation.'"[97]**

> **"Say: It is in Our power, should We wish it, to cause all created things to expire in an instant, and, with the next, to endue them again with life. The knowledge thereof, however, is with God alone, the All-Knowing, the All-Informed. It is in Our power, should We wish it, to enable a speck of floating dust to generate, in less than the twinkling of an eye, suns of infinite, of unimaginable splendor, to cause a dewdrop to develop into vast and numberless oceans, to infuse into every letter such a force as to empower it to unfold all the knowledge of past and future ages. This, in truth, is a matter simple of accomplishment. Such have been the evidences of My power from the beginning that hath no beginning until the end that hath no end."[98]**

**"Every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of God is endowed with such potency as can instill new life into every human frame, if ye be of them that comprehend this truth. All the wondrous works ye behold in this world have been manifested through the operation of His supreme and most exalted Will, His wondrous and inflexible Purpose. Through the mere revelation of the word 'Fashioner', issuing forth from His lips and proclaiming His attribute to mankind, such power is released as can generate, through successive ages, all the manifold arts which the hands of man can produce. This, verily, is a certain truth. No sooner is this resplendent word uttered, than its animating energies, stirring within all created things, give birth to the means and instruments whereby such arts can be produced and perfected. All the wondrous achievements ye now witness are the direct consequences of the Revelation of this Name. In the days to come, ye will, verily, behold things of which ye have never heard before. Thus hath it been decreed in the Tablets of God, and none can comprehend it except them whose sight is sharp. In like manner, the moment the word expressing My attribute 'The Omniscient' issueth forth from My mouth, every created thing will, according to its capacity and limitations, be invested with the power to unfold the knowledge of the most marvelous sciences, and will be empowered to manifest them in the course of time at the bidding of Him Who is the Almighty, the All-Knowing. Know thou of a certainty that the Revelation of every other Name is accompanied by a similar manifestation of Divine power. Every single letter proceeding out of the mouth of God is indeed a mother letter, and every word uttered by Him Who is the Wellspring of Divine Revelation is a mother word, and His Tablet a Mother Tablet. Well is it with them that apprehend this truth."[99]**

**"I bear witness that the highest thoughts of all such as adore Thy unity, and the profoundest contemplations of all them that have recognized Thee, are but the product of what hath been generated through the movement of the Pen of Thy behest, and hath been begotten by Thy will."[100]**

**"And this is clear: A power above and beyond the powers of nature must needs be brought to bear, to change this black darkness into light, and these hatreds and resentments, grudges and spites, these endless wrangles and wars, into fellowship and love amongst all the peoples of the earth. This power is none other than the breathings of the Holy Spirit and the mighty inflow of the Word of God."[101]**

**"Today nothing but the power of the Word of God which encompasses the realities of things can bring the thoughts, the minds, the hearts and the spirits under the shade of one Tree. He is the potent in all things, the vivifier of souls, the preserver and the controller of the world of mankind."[102]**

**"Who is there that can put out the light which the snow-white Hand of God hath lit? Where is he to be found that hath the power to quench the fire which hath been kindled through the might of thy Lord, the All-Powerful, the All-Compelling, the Almighty? It is the Hand of Divine might that hath extinguished the flames of dissension. Powerful is He to do that which He pleaseth. He saith: Be; and it is. Say: The fierce gales and whirlwinds of the world and its peoples can never shake the foundation upon which the rock-like stability of My chosen ones is based."[103]**

Write a few sentences which refer to God, the All-Powerful, and to His power. An example is given to assist you.

a. God is the Source of all sovereignty and power.

b.

c.

d.

e.

f.

Although we know that we are weak, we are also certain that God will empower us to serve His Cause. Reflecting on your own life and what you have witnessed in the field of service, write a few sentences about the power of Divine assistance.

a. Formidable obstacles are overcome through the power of Divine assistance.

b.

c.

d.

e.

f.

g.

## SECTION 19

To serve the Cause of God effectively, we must first acknowledge our weakness and utter powerlessness and then turn towards Him Who is the Source of all power. God calls upon us to surrender our wills to His, to place our complete trust in Him, and to be content with that which He ordains. Drawing confidence from the knowledge that He does whatsoever He wills, we commit our affairs to His keeping and strive to bring our lives into conformity with His commands. Through His unfailing aid we are enabled, each in accordance with a measure of His grace, to serve His Cause.

**"All praise be to Thee, O Lord, my God! I know not how to sing Thy praise, how to describe Thy glory, how to call upon Thy Name. If I call upon Thee by Thy Name, the All-Possessing, I am compelled to recognize that He Who holdeth in His hand the immediate destinies of all created things is but a vassal dependent upon Thee, and is the creation of but a word proceeding from Thy mouth. And if I proclaim Thee by the name of Him Who is the All-Compelling, I readily discover that He is but a suppliant fallen upon the dust, awe-stricken by Thy dreadful might, Thy sovereignty and power. And if I attempt to describe Thee by glorifying the oneness of Thy Being, I soon realize that such a conception is but a notion which mine own fancy hath woven, and that Thou hast ever been immeasurably exalted above the vain imaginations which the hearts of men have devised."[104]**

**"Glorified, immeasurably glorified art Thou, my Best-Beloved! Inasmuch as Thou hast ordained that the utmost limit to which they who lift their hearts to Thee can rise is the confession of their powerlessness to enter the realms of Thy holy and transcendent unity, and that the highest station which they who aspire to know Thee can reach is the acknowledgment of their impotence to attain the retreats of Thy sublime knowledge I, therefore, beseech Thee, by this very powerlessness which is beloved of Thee, and which Thou hast decreed as the goal of them that have reached and attained Thy court, and by the splendors of Thy countenance that have encompassed all things, and by the energies of Thy Will whereby the entire creation hath been generated, not to deprive them that have set their hopes in Thee of the wonders of Thy mercy, nor to withhold from such as have sought Thee the treasures of Thy grace."[105]**

**"I beg of Thee, O my God, by Thy most exalted Word which Thou hast ordained as the Divine Elixir unto all who are in Thy realm, the Elixir through whose potency the crude metal of human life hath been transmuted into purest gold, O Thou in Whose hands are both the visible and invisible kingdoms, to ordain that my choice be conformed to Thy choice and my wish to Thy wish, that I may be entirely content with that which Thou didst desire, and be wholly satisfied with what Thou didst destine for me by Thy bounteousness and favor. Potent art Thou to do as Thou willest. Thou, in very truth, art the All-Glorious, the All-Wise."[106]**

**"Say: Beware, O people of Bahá, lest the strong ones of the earth rob you of your strength, or they who rule the world fill you with fear. Put your trust in God, and commit your affairs to His keeping. He, verily, will, through the power of truth, render you victorious, and He, verily, is powerful to do what He willeth, and in His grasp are the reins of omnipotent might."[107]**

**"Methinks, the lamp of Thy love is burning in their hearts, and the light of Thy tenderness is lit within their breasts. Adversities are incapable of estranging them from Thy Cause, and the vicissitudes of fortune can never cause them to stray from Thy pleasure.**

**"I beseech Thee, O my God, by them and by the sighs which their hearts utter in their separation from Thee, to keep them safe from the mischief of Thine adversaries, and to nourish their souls with what Thou hast ordained for Thy loved ones on whom shall come no fear and who shall not be put to grief."[108]**

From the history of the Faith and recent events with which you yourself are familiar, write down a few examples in which great deeds were accomplished by ordinary people from diverse walks of life, young and old, through the power of Divine assistance.

## SECTION 20

God is the All-Glorious. Below are but two of many passages in which Bahá'u'lláh refers to God's glory and splendor.

**"Praise be to God, the All-Possessing, the King of incomparable glory, a praise which is immeasurably above the understanding of all created things, and is exalted beyond the grasp of the minds of men. None else besides Him hath ever been able to sing adequately His praise, nor will any man succeed at any time in describing the full measure of His glory. Who is it that can claim to have attained the heights of His exalted Essence, and what mind can measure the depths of His unfathomable mystery? From each and every revelation emanating from the Source of His glory, holy and never-ending evidences of unimaginable splendor have appeared, and out of every manifestation of His invincible power oceans of eternal light have poured."[109]**

**"Thy might beareth me witness! Were it not to celebrate Thy praise, my tongue would be of no use to me, and were it not for the sake of rendering service to Thee, my existence would avail me not. But for the pleasure of beholding the splendors of Thy realm of glory, why should I cherish sight? And but for the joy of giving ear to Thy most sweet voice, of what use is hearing?"[110]**

"Bahá", which means "glory" in Arabic, is the Greatest Name of God. The mysteries enshrined in this name are numerous, and we gradually gain insight into its significance through a life of servitude to Him Who is the All-Glorious. The following paragraphs, which draw on an article written by Hand of the Cause of God Abu'l-Qásim Faizí, will assist you in your reflections on this most excellent title and most exalted attribute.

The identity of the Greatest Name of God had long been concealed from mortal eyes, hidden behind mystic veils. Only at the appointed hour was it to be revealed. Prophets of the past had made reference to the Greatest Name, and throughout the centuries, many longed to catch a glimpse of its splendor. The followers of Krishna expected His return under the name of "Vishnu Yasha", which means "Glory of God". It is written that one of Buddha's disciples asked Him: "Who shall teach us when Thou are gone?" Buddha replied: "I am not the first Buddha who came upon earth, nor shall I be the last. In due time another Buddha will arise . . . He shall reveal to you the same eternal truths which I have taught you. He will preach to you His religion, glorious in its origin, glorious at the climax and glorious at the goal, in the spirit and in the letter." Buddhist scriptures refer to "AMITABHA" as the "Infinite Light of Revelation", the "Unbounded Light", and the "Source of wisdom, of virtue, and of Buddha-hood".

In Isaiah we read, "the glory of Lebanon shall be given unto it, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon; they shall see the glory of the Lord, the excellency of our God." Jesus assured His followers that He would return "in the glory of his Father".

As the Islamic Faith immediately preceded this new Day, some of the veils covering the hidden treasure were removed, and the followers of Muḥammad could perceive the first glimmers of the Greatest Name. Thus we find explicit reference to it in the traditions of Islam. For example, there is a powerful prayer which the Shí'íh Muslims chant at dawn during the month of fasting. The prayer invokes God through His names. There are nineteen such invocations, the first of which revolves around the name Bahá. The opening words of this prayer read as follows: "O God! My God! I beseech Thee by Thy Bahá, Thy Bahá in its entirety. I beseech Thee by all Thy Bahá . . ." It is an Islamic tradition that among the nineteen names invoked in this prayer, one is the Greatest Name of God.

At last, through the movement of the Báb's exalted Pen, the remaining veils were torn away. His followers came to know that "Bahá" was the treasured name soon to be manifested in all splendor and majesty. So special did He consider this name that He instructed His secretary to use red ink wherever the word "Bahá" appeared in His Tablets. He explicitly stated: "Well is it with him who fixeth his gaze upon the Order of Bahá'u'lláh, and rendereth thanks unto his Lord."

Today, Bahá'u'lláh is calling humanity from the highest summits of glory. He has confirmed that the Greatest Name of God is indeed "Bahá". The Universal House of Justice states in a letter written on its behalf:

> **"As mankind advances under the guidance of the Manifestations of God, the intensity and scope of Their Revelations increase. Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'ís believe, has brought the greatest Revelation of God so far—a Revelation which is to unite mankind—and thus Bahá'u'lláh is regarded as the Revealer of the Greatest Name of God."[111]**

There are various derivatives of the word "Bahá", and these are also regarded as the Greatest Name. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi explains:

> **"The Greatest Name is the Name of Bahá'u'lláh. 'Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá' is an invocation meaning: 'O Thou Glory of Glories!' 'Alláh-u-Abhá' is a greeting which means: 'God the All-Glorious.' Both refer to Bahá'u'lláh. By Greatest Name is meant that Bahá'u'lláh has appeared in God's Greatest Name, in other words, that He is the supreme Manifestation of God."[112]**

In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh exhorts us to repeat "Alláh-u-Abhá" ninety-five times every day, and we know well that this practice is a source of untold bounty and joy.

Two symbols associated with the Greatest Name are familiar to us all. One is the design in Arabic script of "Yá Bahá'u'l-Abhá" by the accomplished calligrapher Mishkín-Qalam:



The other is the symbol of the Greatest Name often found on a ring stone:



In the center of this emblem, the letters "B" and "H" in Arabic are joined in a beautiful and intricate way. The three horizontal lines represent the world of God, the world of the Manifestations, and the world of creation, respectively. Humanity, left to itself, can never

recognize God and attain His presence. God, in His great bounty, has singled out His Chosen Ones to guide it and enable it to catch glimpses of the unfading glories of realms beyond. This is depicted in the symbol by having the middle horizontal line, which represents the world of the Manifestations, repeated in a vertical line, thus joining the world of the Creator to that of His creation.

Of course, there are many profound meanings to the central design of the symbol, but we will not go beyond the description above based on the article written by Mr. Faizí. As for the two stars that appear on either side of the central design, we read the following in a Tablet revealed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

> **“. . . two brilliant stars blazed out and shone forth above the horizon of ancient glory, one from the right and the other from the left. And this is the great mystery concealed in the two shapes that are drawn to the left and right of the Greatest Name on the revered ringstone symbol, namely, the manifestations of Bahá’u’lláh and the Báb. And although these two are in the form of stars, they symbolize in reality the human temple, which consisteth of a head, two arms and two legs.”**[113]

It is hoped that the brief introduction provided in this section will help you as you contemplate the significance of the Greatest Name, whose powerful influence pervades our lives. We repeat it ninety-five times a day. We invoke it in times of need. It is ever present in our minds and hearts. Reflect on the following passage in which Bahá’u’lláh speaks of how we should draw on the power of the Most Great Name:

> **“Walk thou high above the world of being through the power of the Most Great Name, that thou mayest become aware of the immemorial mysteries and be acquainted with that wherewith no one is acquainted. Verily, thy Lord is the Helper, the All-Knowing, the All-Informed. Be thou as a throbbing artery, pulsating in the body of the entire creation, that through the heat generated by this motion there may appear that which will quicken the hearts of those who hesitate.”**[114]

## SECTION 21

In the preceding sections, we have reflected on some of the names and attributes of God, knowing that our understanding of their significance gradually grows as we study the revealed Word and contemplate His creation. In dedicating our lives to the promotion of His Cause, we continually receive the blessings that flow from these exalted names. Before we leave this topic, you may wish to meditate on the passage below and commit as much of it as possible to memory.

> **“Say: Blessed the slumberer who is awakened by My Breeze. Blessed the lifeless one who is quickened through My reviving breaths. Blessed the eye that is solaced by gazing at My beauty. Blessed the wayfarer who directeth his steps towards the Tabernacle of My glory and majesty. Blessed the distressed one who seeketh refuge beneath the shadow of My canopy. Blessed the sore athirst who hasteneth to the soft-flowing waters of My loving-kindness. Blessed the insatiate soul who casteth away his selfish desires for love of Me and taketh his place at the banquet table which I have sent down from the heaven of divine bounty for My chosen**

**ones. Blessed the abased one who layeth fast hold on the cord of My glory; and the needy one who entereth beneath the shadow of the Tabernacle of My wealth. Blessed the ignorant one who seeketh the fountain of My knowledge; and the heedless one who cleaveth to the cord of My remembrance. Blessed the soul that hath been raised to life through My quickening breath and hath gained admittance into My heavenly Kingdom. Blessed the man whom the sweet savors of reunion with Me have stirred and caused to draw nigh unto the Dayspring of My Revelation. Blessed the ear that hath heard and the tongue that hath borne witness and the eye that hath seen and recognized the Lord Himself, in His great glory and majesty, invested with grandeur and dominion. Blessed are they that have attained His presence. Blessed the man who hath sought enlightenment from the Daystar of My Word. Blessed he who hath attired his head with the diadem of My love. Blessed is he who hath heard of My grief and hath arisen to aid Me among My people. Blessed is he who hath laid down his life in My path and hath borne manifold hardships for the sake of My name. Blessed the man who, assured of My Word, hath arisen from among the dead to celebrate My praise. Blessed is he that hath been enraptured by My wondrous melodies and hath rent the veils asunder through the potency of My might. Blessed is he who hath remained faithful to My Covenant, and whom the things of the world have not kept back from attaining My Court of holiness. Blessed is the man who hath detached himself from all else but Me, hath soared in the atmosphere of My love, hath gained admittance into My Kingdom, gazed upon My realms of glory, quaffed the living waters of My bounty, hath drunk his fill from the heavenly river of My loving providence, acquainted himself with My Cause, apprehended that which I concealed within the treasury of My Words, and hath shone forth from the horizon of divine knowledge engaged in My praise and glorification. Verily, he is of Me. Upon him rest My mercy, My loving-kindness, My bounty and My glory."**[115]

## SECTION 22

The insights we have gained, however inadequate, into the attributes of God have prepared us to explore further the concept of the eternal Covenant. The Covenant is, in essence, about knowing God and obeying His commands. We have already said that we can never know the reality of God but that, out of His infinite love for humanity, He reveals to us His names and attributes, His Will and purpose, through His Manifestations. It is in this sense, then, that we speak of knowing God. Most of the concepts we will explore, beginning in this section and extending through Section 26, are drawn from the Kitáb-i-Íqán, in which Bahá'u'lláh explains to us the nature of God's Revelation. You may, of course, already be well familiar with this volume, having made it the object of your personal study. If not, you may wish to take the opportunity upon completion of this course to read the Kitáb-i-Íqán. Here we will only look at certain specific passages. Let us begin with the following statement:

**"To every discerning and illumined heart it is evident that God, the unknowable Essence, the divine Being, is immensely exalted beyond every human attribute, such as corporeal existence, ascent and descent, egress and regress. Far be it from His glory that human tongue should adequately recount His praise, or that human heart comprehend His fathomless mystery. He is and hath ever been veiled in the ancient eternity of His Essence, and will remain in His Reality everlastingly**

**hidden from the sight of men. 'No vision taketh in Him, but He taketh in all vision; He is the Subtile, the All-Perceiving.'"**[116]

Bahá'u'lláh further explains in the Kitáb-i-Íqán:

**"The door of the knowledge of the Ancient of Days being thus closed in the face of all beings, the Source of infinite grace, according to His saying: 'His grace hath transcended all things; My grace hath encompassed them all' hath caused those luminous Gems of Holiness to appear out of the realm of the spirit, in the noble form of the human temple, and be made manifest unto all men, that they may impart unto the world the mysteries of the unchangeable Being, and tell of the subtleties of His imperishable Essence. These sanctified Mirrors, these Daysprings of ancient glory are one and all the Exponents on earth of Him Who is the central Orb of the universe, its Essence and ultimate Purpose. From Him proceed their knowledge and power; from Him is derived their sovereignty. The beauty of their countenance is but a reflection of His image, and their revelation a sign of His deathless glory. They are the Treasuries of divine knowledge, and the Repositories of celestial wisdom. Through them is transmitted a grace that is infinite, and by them is revealed the light that can never fade."**[117]

**"These Tabernacles of holiness, these primal Mirrors which reflect the light of unfading glory, are but expressions of Him Who is the Invisible of the Invisibles. By the revelation of these Gems of Divine virtue all the names and attributes of God, such as knowledge and power, sovereignty and dominion, mercy and wisdom, glory, bounty and grace, are made manifest."**[118]

In the following excerpt from a Tablet revealed by Bahá'u'lláh, we find the same theme being addressed:

**"Know thou of a certainty that the Unseen can in no wise incarnate His Essence and reveal it unto men. He is, and hath ever been, immensely exalted beyond all that can either be recounted or perceived. From His retreat of glory His voice is ever proclaiming: 'Verily, I am God; there is none other God besides Me, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise. I have manifested Myself unto men, and have sent down Him Who is the Dayspring of the signs of My Revelation. Through Him I have caused all creation to testify that there is none other God except Him, the Incomparable, the All-Informed, the All-Wise.' He Who is everlastingly hidden from the eyes of men can never be known except through His Manifestation, and His Manifestation can adduce no greater proof of the truth of His Mission than the proof of His own Person."**[119]

You may find the exercises below helpful in reflecting on the above quotations.

1. Give some examples of things that do not have corporeal or material existence:

_____

_____

_____

2. Besides “corporeal existence”, “ascent and descent”, and “egress and regress”, mention some other human characteristics that we know God is exalted beyond. For example, change is a human attribute that does not apply to God.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

3. How would you explain our conviction that, although the human tongue cannot adequately recount God’s praises, we should nevertheless constantly praise Him in our prayers and in our thoughts?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

4. How would you explain our conviction that, although the human heart cannot comprehend God’s fathomless mysteries, we should nevertheless make the greatest effort throughout life to reflect on His signs and His attributes?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

5. Complete the following sentences:

   a. The door of the knowledge of God being closed in the face of all beings, He has caused those _____ to appear out of the _____ of the spirit, in the _____ of the _____ _____ , and be made _____ .

   b. These Gems of Holiness have appeared out of the realm of the spirit and have been made manifest to all men that they may _____ _____ , and _____ _____ .

c. The beauty emanating from the Manifestations of God is a reflection of _____ _____ .

d. Their revelation is a sign of _____ .

e. They are the Treasuries of _____ .

f. They are the Repositories of _____ .

g. Through them is transmitted _____ .

h. By them is revealed _____ .

i. These primal Mirrors are but expressions of _____ _____ .

j. By the revelation of these Gems of Divine virtue _____ _____ _____ _____ .

Now discuss the following theme in your group: There is no greater proof of the truth of the Missions of God's Manifestations than the proof of their own Persons. Space is provided below for you to write down some of the salient points discussed.

## SECTION 23

In the Kitáb-i-Íqán, Bahá'u'lláh refers to a twofold station of God's Manifestations. Regarding the first, the station of essential unity, He explains:

> **". . . the Bearers of the trust of God are made manifest unto the peoples of the earth as the Exponents of a new Cause and the Bearers of a new Message. Inasmuch as these Birds of the Celestial Throne are all sent down from the heaven of the Will of God, and as they all arise to proclaim His irresistible Faith, they therefore are regarded as one soul and the same person. For they all drink from the one Cup of the love of God, and all partake of the fruit of the same Tree of Oneness. These Manifestations of God have each a twofold station. One is the station of pure abstraction and essential unity. In this respect, if thou callest them all by one name, and dost ascribe to them the same attribute, thou hast not erred from the truth. . . .**
>
> **"It is clear and evident to thee that all the Prophets are the Temples of the Cause of God, Who have appeared clothed in divers attire. If thou wilt observe with discriminating eyes, thou wilt behold them all abiding in the same tabernacle, soaring in the same heaven, seated upon the same throne, uttering the same speech, and proclaiming the same Faith. Such is the unity of those Essences of being, those Luminaries of infinite and immeasurable splendor. Wherefore, should one of these Manifestations of Holiness proclaim saying: 'I am the return of all the Prophets,' He verily speaketh the truth. In like manner, in every subsequent Revelation, the return of the former Revelation is a fact, the truth of which is firmly established."[120]**

Expounding on the subject of "return", 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that we should consider "not the individuality of the person but the reality of his perfections". He goes on to say:

> **"For example, last year there was a flower, and this year there has also appeared a flower. When I say that the flower of last year has returned, I do not mean that the same flower has returned with the selfsame identity. But since this flower is endowed with the same attributes as last year's flower—as it possesses the same fragrance, delicacy, color, and form—it is said that last year's flower has returned, and that this is that same flower. Likewise, when spring comes we say that last year's spring has returned, since all that was found in the former is to be found again in the latter. This is why Christ said, 'Ye will witness all that came to pass in the days of the former Prophets.'**

**"Let us give another illustration: Last year's seed was sown, branches and leaves appeared, blossoms and fruit came forth, and in the end a new seed was produced. When this second seed is planted, it will grow into a tree, and once more those leaves, blossoms, branches, and fruit will return, and the former tree will once again appear. As the beginning was a seed and the end likewise a seed, we say that the seed has returned. When we consider the material substance of the tree, it is different, but when we consider the blossoms, leaves, and fruit, the same fragrance, taste, and delicacy are produced. Hence the perfection of the tree has returned anew.**

**"In the same way, if we consider the individual, it is a different one, but if we consider the attributes and perfections, the same have returned."**[121]

The exercises below are intended to help you think through some of the ideas presented in these passages.

1. On the basis of the excerpt from the Kitáb-i-Íqán, complete the following sentences:

   a. Though the Manifestations of God are each the Exponents of a _____ and the Bearers of a _____ , they are all sent down from the _____ of the _____ and all arise to proclaim _____ .

   b. In that God's Manifestations are all _____ from the heaven of the Will of God and they all _____ His irresistible Faith, they therefore are regarded as _____ and the _____ _____ .

   c. All of His Manifestations drink from the _____ of the _____ of God and partake of the _____ of the _____ .

2. Are God's names and attributes given to some of the Manifestations and not to others?

   _____

3. Referring to their station of unity, Bahá'u'lláh states that, though the Manifestations of God have appeared _____ in _____ attire, they are all the _____ of the Cause of God.

4. Bahá'u'lláh makes clear that God's Manifestations all

   – abide _____ ;

   – soar _____ ;

   – are seated _____ ;

– utter _____ ;

– proclaim _____ .

5. In relation to the concept of "return", Bahá'u'lláh states that, should any one of the Manifestations of God proclaim _____ _____ , He would be speaking the truth and that, in the same manner, in every subsequent Revelation, _____ is a _____ .

Now, drawing on the above passage from the Kitáb-i-Íqán and the explanation provided by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, write a short paragraph expressing your understanding of the idea that every Manifestation of God is the return of the Manifestations Who have come before Him.

## SECTION 24

Regarding the other station of God's Manifestations, Bahá'u'lláh states in the Kitáb-i-Íqán:

**"We have already in the foregoing pages assigned two stations unto each of the Luminaries arising from the Daysprings of eternal holiness. One of these stations, the station of essential unity, We have already explained. 'No distinction do We make between any of them.' The other is the station of distinction, and pertaineth to the world of creation and to the limitations thereof. In this respect, each Manifestation of God hath a distinct individuality, a definitely prescribed mission, a predestined Revelation, and specially designated limitations. Each one of them is known by a different name, is characterized by a special attribute, fulfills a definite Mission, and is entrusted with a particular Revelation. . . .**

**"It is because of this difference in their station and mission that the words and utterances flowing from these Wellsprings of divine knowledge appear to diverge and differ. Otherwise, in the eyes of them that are initiated into the mysteries of divine wisdom, all their utterances are in reality but the expressions of one Truth. As most of the people have failed to appreciate those stations to which We have referred, they therefore feel perplexed and dismayed at the varying utterances pronounced by Manifestations that are essentially one and the same."[122]**

In your efforts to reflect on the above passage, you are encouraged to carry out the following exercises:

1. Viewed from the standpoint of distinction, each one of the Manifestations of God has

   a. _____

   b. _____

   c. _____

   d. _____

2. With respect to the station of distinction, each Manifestation

   - is known by _____ ;
   - is characterized by _____ ;
   - fulfills _____ ;
   - is entrusted with _____ .

3. Why do the words and utterances flowing from the Manifestations of God appear to differ? _____

   _____

4. Although the words and utterances of the Manifestations of God appear to differ because of their station and mission, they are, in reality, _____

   _____ .

Discuss the following question in your group: Given that the concept of the unity of the Manifestations of God is so clear, what do you think would cause a community to claim that the Founder of its religion is the best and the last? You may wish to write down here some of the points discussed.

## SECTION 25

The following excerpt from the Kitáb-i-Íqán helps us catch a glimmer of insight into the relationship between God and His Manifestations:

> **"Were any of the all-embracing Manifestations of God to declare: 'I am God!' He, verily, speaketh the truth, and no doubt attacheth thereto. For it hath been repeatedly demonstrated that through their Revelation, their attributes and names, the Revelation of God, His name and His attributes, are made manifest in the world. . . . And were any of them to voice the utterance: 'I am the Messenger of God,' He also speaketh the truth, the indubitable truth. . . . Viewed in this light, they are all but Messengers of that ideal King, that unchangeable Essence. And were they all to proclaim: 'I am the Seal of the Prophets,' they verily utter but the truth, beyond the faintest shadow of doubt. For they are all but one person, one soul, one spirit, one being, one revelation. They are all the manifestation of the 'Beginning' and the 'End', the 'First' and the 'Last', the 'Seen' and 'Hidden'—all of which pertain to Him Who is the innermost Spirit of Spirits and eternal Essence of Essences. And were they to say: 'We are the servants of God,' this also is a manifest and indisputable fact. For they have been made manifest in the uttermost state of servitude, a servitude the like of which no man can possibly attain. Thus in moments in which these Essences of being were deeply immersed beneath the oceans of ancient and everlasting holiness, or when they soared to the loftiest summits of divine mysteries, they claimed their utterance to be the Voice of divinity, the Call of God Himself. Were the eye of discernment to be opened, it would recognize that in this very state, they have considered themselves utterly**

**effaced and nonexistent in the face of Him Who is the All-Pervading, the Incorruptible. Methinks they have regarded themselves as utter nothingness, and deemed their mention in that Court an act of blasphemy. For the slightest whispering of self, within such a Court, is an evidence of self-assertion and independent existence. In the eyes of them that have attained unto that Court, such a suggestion is itself a grievous transgression. How much more grievous would it be, were aught else to be mentioned in that Presence, were man's heart, his tongue, his mind, or his soul, to be busied with anyone but the Well-Beloved, were his eyes to behold any countenance other than His beauty, were his ear to be inclined to any melody but His voice, and were his feet to tread any way but His way."[123]**

In the above passage, Bahá'u'lláh explains to us how the Manifestations of God speak of their Being, of their station, and of the message they each bring. To help you think through the profound concepts presented, complete the following sentences:

a. Bahá'u'lláh tells us that, were any of the Manifestations of God to declare: "I am God!", He would be speaking the truth, for through their _____ , their _____ and _____ , the _____ of God, His _____ and His _____ , are made _____ in the _____ .

b. Bahá'u'lláh explains that, were any of the Manifestations of God to make the statement "I am the Messenger of God," He would also be speaking the truth, in that they are all but _____ of that _____ , that _____ .

c. Bahá'u'lláh explains further that, were all the Manifestations of God to proclaim, "I am the Seal of the Prophets," again they would be speaking the truth, for they are all but one _____ , one _____ , one _____ , one _____ , one _____ and they are all the manifestation of the "_____" and the "_____ ", the "_____" and the "_____ ", the "_____" and "_____"—all of which pertain to _____ _____ _____ .

d. Bahá'u'lláh goes on to tell us that, were all the Manifestations of God to say: "We are the servants of God," this would also be an indisputable fact, for they have been made manifest in _____ , a _____ the like of which _____ .

e. Bahá'u'lláh makes clear that, in moments in which the Manifestations were deeply immersed beneath _____ _____ , or when they soared to _____

_____ , they claimed their utterance to be _____ of _____ , the _____ of _____ . In this very state, Bahá'u'lláh tells us, they have

- considered themselves _____ _____ _____ ,
- regarded themselves as _____ ,
- deemed their mention in God's holy Court _____ .

In light of what you have read in this section, can you mention some additional insights you have gained into the mysteries enshrouding the relationship between God, the almighty Creator, and those sanctified Beings, His Manifestations, Who stand so infinitely apart from all of creation?

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## SECTION 26

In the following passage from a Tablet revealed by Bahá'u'lláh during the period of His banishment to 'Akká, He asks us to meditate on the motive and reason for the persecution inflicted upon all the Manifestations as they, Daystars of Divine bounty, shed the light of God's Revelation upon the people of their age:

> **"Consider the former generations. Witness how every time the Daystar of Divine bounty hath shed the light of His Revelation upon the world, the people of His Day**

**have arisen against Him, and repudiated His truth. They who were regarded as the leaders of men have invariably striven to hinder their followers from turning unto Him Who is the Ocean of God's limitless bounty.**

**"Behold how the people, as a result of the verdict pronounced by the divines of His age, have cast Abraham, the Friend of God, into fire; how Moses, He Who held converse with the Almighty, was denounced as liar and slanderer. Reflect how Jesus, the Spirit of God, was, notwithstanding His extreme meekness and perfect tender-heartedness, treated by His enemies. So fierce was the opposition which He, the Essence of Being and Lord of the visible and invisible, had to face, that He had nowhere to lay His head. He wandered continually from place to place, deprived of a permanent abode. Ponder that which befell Muḥammad, the Seal of the Prophets, may the life of all else be a sacrifice unto Him. . . .**

**"Thou hast known how grievously the Prophets of God, His Messengers and Chosen Ones, have been afflicted. Meditate awhile on the motive and reason which have been responsible for such a persecution. At no time, in no Dispensation, have the Prophets of God escaped the blasphemy of their enemies, the cruelty of their oppressors, the denunciation of the learned of their age, who appeared in the guise of uprightness and piety. Day and night they passed through such agonies as none can ever measure, except the knowledge of the one true God, exalted be His glory.**

**"Consider this wronged One. Though the clearest proofs attest the truth of His Cause; though the prophecies He, in an unmistakable language, hath made have been fulfilled; though, in spite of His not being accounted among the learned, His being unschooled and inexperienced in the disputations current among the divines, He hath rained upon men the showers of His manifold and Divinely inspired knowledge; yet, behold how this generation hath rejected His authority, and rebelled against Him! He hath, during the greater part of His life, been sore-tried in the clutches of His enemies. His sufferings have now reached their culmination in this afflictive Prison, into which His oppressors have so unjustly thrown Him. God grant that, with a penetrating vision and radiant heart, thou mayest observe the things that have come to pass and are now happening, and, pondering them in thine heart, mayest recognize that which most men have, in this Day, failed to perceive. Please God, He may enable thee to inhale the sweet fragrance of His Day, to partake of the limitless effusions of His grace, to quaff thy fill, through His gracious favor, from the most great Ocean that surgeth in this Day in the name of the Ancient King, and to remain firm and immovable as the mountain in His Cause."[124]**

This same theme is treated extensively in the Kitáb-i-Íqán. In one passage, for example, Bahá'u'lláh states:

**"Why is it that the advent of every true Manifestation of God hath been accompanied by such strife and tumult, by such tyranny and upheaval? This notwithstanding the fact that all the Prophets of God, whenever made manifest unto the peoples of the world, have invariably foretold the coming of yet another Prophet after them, and have established such signs as would herald the advent of the future Dispensation. To this the records of all sacred books bear witness. Why then is it that despite the expectation of men in their quest of the Manifestations**

**of Holiness, and in spite of the signs recorded in the sacred books, such acts of violence, of oppression and cruelty, should have been perpetrated in every age and cycle against all the Prophets and chosen Ones of God? . . .**

**"Reflect, what could have been the motive for such deeds? What could have prompted such behavior towards the Revealers of the beauty of the All-Glorious? . . . To maintain that the testimony of Providence was incomplete, that it hath therefore been the cause of the denial of the people, is but open blasphemy. How far from the grace of the All-Bountiful and from His loving providence and tender mercies it is to single out a soul from amongst all men for the guidance of His creatures, and, on one hand, to withhold from Him the full measure of His divine testimony, and, on the other, inflict severe retribution on His people for having turned away from His chosen One! Nay, the manifold bounties of the Lord of all beings have, at all times, through the Manifestations of His divine Essence, encompassed the earth and all that dwell therein. Not for a moment hath His grace been withheld, nor have the showers of His loving-kindness ceased to rain upon mankind. Consequently, such behavior can be attributed to naught save the petty-mindedness of such souls as tread the valley of arrogance and pride, are lost in the wilds of remoteness, walk in the ways of their idle fancy, and follow the dictates of the leaders of their faith. Their chief concern is mere opposition; their sole desire is to ignore the truth. Unto every discerning observer it is evident and manifest that had these people in the days of each of the Manifestations of the Sun of Truth sanctified their eyes, their ears, and their hearts from whatever they had seen, heard, and felt, they surely would not have been deprived of beholding the beauty of God, nor strayed far from the habitations of glory. But having weighed the testimony of God by the standard of their own knowledge, gleaned from the teachings of the leaders of their faith, and found it at variance with their limited understanding, they arose to perpetrate such unseemly acts.**

**"Leaders of religion, in every age, have hindered their people from attaining the shores of eternal salvation, inasmuch as they held the reins of authority in their mighty grasp. Some for the lust of leadership, others through want of knowledge and understanding, have been the cause of the deprivation of the people. By their sanction and authority, every Prophet of God hath drunk from the chalice of sacrifice, and winged His flight unto the heights of glory. What unspeakable cruelties they that have occupied the seats of authority and learning have inflicted upon the true Monarchs of the world, those Gems of divine virtue! Content with a transitory dominion, they have deprived themselves of an everlasting sovereignty. Thus, their eyes beheld not the light of the countenance of the Well-Beloved, nor did their ears hearken unto the sweet melodies of the Bird of Desire."[125]**

He further states:

**"Moreover, consider the hardships and the bitterness of the lives of those Revealers of the divine Beauty. Reflect, how single-handed and alone they faced the world and all its peoples, and promulgated the Law of God! No matter how severe the persecutions inflicted upon those holy, those precious, and tender Souls, they still remained, in the plenitude of their power, patient, and, despite their ascendancy, they suffered and endured."[126]**

It is suggested that you carry out the following exercises as you meditate on these words of Bahá'u'lláh and their significance:

1. How have the generality of the people responded to the call of each Manifestation of God when He appeared? _____

   _____

2. Who has striven to hinder the people from turning to Him? _____

   _____

3. At no _____ , in no _____ , Bahá'u'lláh tells us, have the Manifestations of God escaped the _____ of their _____ , the _____ of their _____ , the _____ of the _____ , who appeared _____

   _____ .

4. What, do you think, are "the motive and reason" for which the Manifestations of God are so persecuted? _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

5. Referring to His Revelation and to the sufferings He endured, Bahá'u'lláh tells us to observe, with a penetrating vision and radiant heart, the things that have passed. What will we recognize when we do so?

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

6. Referring to the lives of God's Manifestations, Bahá'u'lláh calls upon us to reflect on how they, single-handedly and alone, faced the world and all its peoples and promulgated the Law of God and how, despite their power and ascendancy, they remained patient and suffered and endured. Discuss in your group how such reflection is essential for the way we look at the progress of the Cause of God.

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

   _____

It is clear from the passages above that, in every generation, the Manifestation of God suffers at the hands of those who, as explained in the Kitáb-i-Íqán, either for "the lust of leadership" or for "want of knowledge and understanding" have been "the cause of the deprivation of the people". Yet, irrespective of the machinations of such individuals, the light of God's Revelation grows stronger and stronger, illuminating the hearts and minds of more and more and causing civilization to advance. With this unmistakable pattern in mind, can you say a few words about how God's eternal Covenant is renewed in each age with the appearance of His holy Manifestation?

## SECTION 27

The passages you studied in the preceding sections provide us with a powerful account of the eternal Covenant of God. They speak with clarity of the way God, the imperishable Essence, makes Himself known to humanity and describe the station of those sanctified Beings Who are the Daystars of His divine guidance. Thus, we feel assured that God never leaves humanity alone and that, through His Manifestations, He will reveal to us His Word and His purpose progressively, in accordance with the needs of each age. The following quotations from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh explain this idea:

> **"Every Prophet Whom the Almighty and Peerless Creator hath purposed to send to the peoples of the earth hath been entrusted with a Message, and charged to act in a manner that would best meet the requirements of the age in which He appeared."**[127]

> **"The Prophets of God should be regarded as physicians whose task is to foster the well-being of the world and its peoples, that, through the spirit of oneness, they may heal the sickness of a divided humanity."**[128]

**"Little wonder, then, if the treatment prescribed by the physician in this day should not be found to be identical with that which he prescribed before. How could it be otherwise when the ills affecting the sufferer necessitate at every stage of his sickness a special remedy?"[129]**

**"In like manner, every time the Prophets of God have illumined the world with the resplendent radiance of the Daystar of Divine knowledge, they have invariably summoned its peoples to embrace the light of God through such means as best befitted the exigencies of the age in which they appeared."[130]**

Regarding progressive revelation, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains a number of essential points in the selection of passages below. He indicates, in this connection, that every Manifestation is the Founder of a new Dispensation, each with its own religious text, whether oral or written, which contains the revealed Word of God. We know, of course, that the Word of God is endowed with tremendous power, and the appearance of every Manifestation, 'Abdu'l-Bahá reminds us, is accompanied by great human advances. Yet, He makes clear, there is no end to the attainments of humanity. Therefore, in every age a new Manifestation will appear—the Bearer of a new Revelation that confirms fundamental truths to which all divine religions have given expression and that provides teachings and ordinances commensurate with humanity's growing capacity for social progress.

**"The independent Prophets are each the Author of a divine religion and the Founder of a new Dispensation. At Their advent the world is clothed in a new attire, a new religion is established and a new Book revealed. These Prophets acquire the outpouring grace of the divine Reality without an intermediary. Their radiance is an essential radiance like that of the sun, which is luminous in and of itself and whose luminosity is an essential requirement rather than being acquired from another star: They are like the sun and not the moon. These Daysprings of the morn of Divine Unity are the fountainheads of divine grace and the mirrors of the Essence of Reality. . . .**

**"In the beginning, this tree was full of vitality and laden with blossoms and fruit, but gradually it grew old, spent, and barren, until it entirely withered and decayed. That is why the True Gardener will again plant a tender sapling of the same stock, that it may grow and develop day by day, extend its sheltering shade in this heavenly garden, and yield its prized fruit. So it is with the divine religions: With the passage of time, their original precepts are altered, their underlying truth entirely vanishes, their spirit departs, heresies spring up, and they become a body without a soul. That is why they are renewed."[131]**

**"The religion of God consists of two parts: One is the very foundation and belongs to the spiritual realm; that is, it pertains to spiritual virtues and divine qualities. This part suffers neither change nor alteration: It is the Holy of Holies, which constitutes the essence of the religion of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Christ, Muḥammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh, and which will endure throughout all the prophetic Dispensations. It will never be abrogated, for it consists in spiritual rather than material truth. It is faith, knowledge, certitude, justice, piety, high-mindedness, trustworthiness, love of God, and charity. It is mercy to the poor, assistance to the oppressed, generosity to the needy, and upliftment of the fallen. It is purity, detachment, humility, forbearance, patience, and constancy. These**

**are divine qualities. These commandments will never be abrogated, but will remain in force and effect for all eternity. These human virtues are renewed in every Dispensation; for at the close of each Dispensation the spiritual law of God, which consists in the human virtues, vanishes in substance and persists only in form. . . .**

**"Those foundations of the religion of God, however, which are spiritual and consist in human virtues, are never subject to abrogation but are eternal and everlasting, and are renewed in every prophetic Dispensation.**

**"The second part of the religion of God, which pertains to the material world and which concerns such things as fasting; prayer; worship; marriage; divorce; manumission; legal rulings; transactions; and penalties and punishments for murder, assault, theft, and injury, is changed and altered in every prophetic Dispensation and may be abrogated—for policies, transactions, punishments, and other laws are bound to change according to the exigencies of the time."[132]**

The Guardian further states:

**"The successive Founders of all past Religions Who, from time immemorial, have shed, with ever-increasing intensity, the splendor of one common Revelation at the various stages which have marked the advance of mankind towards maturity may thus, in a sense, be regarded as preliminary Manifestations, anticipating and paving the way for the advent of that Day of Days when the whole earth will have fructified and the tree of humanity will have yielded its destined fruit.**

**"Incontrovertible as is this truth, its challenging character should never be allowed to obscure the purpose, or distort the principle, underlying the utterances of Bahá'u'lláh—utterances that have established for all time the absolute oneness of all the Prophets, Himself included, whether belonging to the past or to the future. Though the mission of the Prophets preceding Bahá'u'lláh may be viewed in that light, though the measure of Divine Revelation with which each has been entrusted must, as a result of this process of evolution, necessarily differ, their common origin, their essential unity, their identity of purpose, should at no time and under no circumstances be misapprehended or denied. That all the Messengers of God should be regarded as "*abiding in the same Tabernacle, soaring in the same Heaven, seated upon the same Throne, uttering the same Speech, and proclaiming the same Faith*" must, however much we may extol the measure of Divine Revelation vouchsafed to mankind at this crowning stage of its evolution, remain the unalterable foundation and central tenet of Bahá'í belief. Any variations in the splendor which each of these Manifestations of the Light of God has shed upon the world should be ascribed not to any inherent superiority involved in the essential character of any one of them, but rather to the progressive capacity, the ever-increasing spiritual receptiveness, which mankind, in its progress towards maturity, has invariably manifested."[133]**

Drawing on some of the words and phrases below, write a paragraph or two that explains the concept of "progressive revelation".

every Prophet, essential unity, religion, Dispensation, divine, exigencies of the time, requirements of the age, spiritual realm, material world, change, abrogated, renewed, differ, variations, remedy, mankind, progressive capacity, eternal, time, decayed

## SECTION 28

With the help of the concept of progressive revelation, we begin to see plainly the sweep of human history. The exquisite beauty of the teachings of the Manifestations that have appeared down the ages, each of Whom has moved humanity closer to its destiny, unfolds before our eyes. Of course, not all of God's Manifestations are known to us today, but the long, historical movement towards a civilization that will reflect divine attributes is unmistakable. This may be an opportune moment to delight in the beauty of the teachings of some of the Manifestations by reading a few short passages from the Sacred Writings of Hinduism, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.

We read the following from the Sacred Text of Hinduism, the Central Figure of which is Krishna. Though the exact period of His Revelation is unknown, many believe He appeared as many as five thousand years ago:

> **Freedom from fear, purity of heart, constancy in sacred learning and contemplation, generosity, self-harmony, adoration, study of the scriptures, austerity, righteousness;**
>
> **Nonviolence, truth, freedom from anger, renunciation, serenity, aversion to faultfinding, sympathy for all beings, peace from greedy cravings, gentleness, modesty, steadiness;**
>
> **Energy, forgiveness, fortitude, purity, a good will, freedom from pride—these are the treasures of the man who is born for heaven.**
>
> *Bhagavad Gita 16:1–3*

> **Only by love can men see me, and know me, and come unto me.**
>
> *Bhagavad Gita 11:54*

> **Therefore dedicate thyself to thy work, with no thought as to its reward. For by working with no thought of reward, one attains to the Supreme.**
>
> *Bhagavad Gita 3:19*

> **By Me, Unmanifest in form, this whole universe was spun: in Me subsist all beings, I do not subsist in them. . . .**
>
> **A world of moving and unmoving things Material Nature brings to birth, while I look on and supervise: this is the cause and this the means by which the world revolves.**
>
> **For that a human form I have assumed fools scorn Me, knowing nothing of my higher nature—Great Lord of all contingent beings.**
>
> *Bhagavad Gita 9:4, 10–11*

> **Whenever there is a decline in righteousness, O Bharata, and the rise of irreligion, it is then that I send forth My spirit.**
>
> **For the salvation of the good, the destruction of the wicked, and for firmly establishing true religion, I manifest myself from age to age.**
>
> *Bhagavad Gita 4:7–8*

Both Abraham and Moses are associated with the Jewish Faith. Some believe the Former appeared around 4000 years ago, while the Latter likely lived several hundred years later. In addition to the Torah, which tells the story of the Jewish people and records their most central teachings, including the Ten Commandments revealed by Moses, there are several other written books associated with Judaism, some of which contain the pronouncements of Prophets Who came under His shadow. In these Texts, we read:

**The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.**
**He maketh me to lie down in green pastures;**
**He leadeth me beside the still waters.**
**He restoreth my soul;**
**He guideth me in straight paths for His name's sake.**
**Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,**
**I will fear no evil,**
**For Thou art with me;**
**Thy rod and Thy staff, they comfort me.**
**Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies;**
**Thou hast anointed my head with oil; my cup runneth over.**
**Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life;**
**And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.**

*Psalms 23:1–6*

**And He will teach us of His ways,**
**And we will walk in His paths';**
**For out of Zion shall go forth the law,**
**And the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.**
**And He shall judge between many peoples,**
**And shall decide concerning mighty nations afar off;**
**And they shall beat their swords into plowshares,**
**And their spears into pruning-hooks;**
**Nation shall not lift up sword against nation,**
**Neither shall they learn war any more.**
**But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig-tree;**
**And none shall make them afraid;**
**For the mouth of the Lord of hosts hath spoken.**

*Micah 4:2–4*

It is generally understood that Zoroaster appeared, more or less, around 1000 BC. From the Sacred Texts of Zoroastrianism, we read:

**Purity is for man, next to life, the greatest good.**

*Zend-Avesta*

**Let us embrace and propagate the good thoughts, good words, and good deeds that have been done and that will be done here and elsewhere, that we may be in the number of the good.**

*Zend-Avesta*

**Lord of broad vision, disclose to me for support the safeguards of your rule, those which are the reward for good thinking. Reveal to me, by reason of my virtuous piety, those conceptions in harmony with truth.**

*Gathas*

**Lord, let wisdom come in the company of truth across the earth! Yes, if ye shall be pleased with your prophet, reveal Thyself with visible help, mighty through Thy hand, through which he might set us in happiness.**

*Gathas*

**I ask Thee, Lord, about those things which indeed are coming and shall come . . .**

**. . . I ask about how that person shall be, namely, the blessed one who shall be eager to prosper the rule of the house or of the district or of the land with truth, and about when he—someone like Thee, Wise Lord—shall appear and with which actions.**

*Gathas*

From the Scriptures of Buddhism, founded by Buddha, Who appeared sometime between 600 and 400 BC, we read:

**A man full of faith, if endowed with virtue and glory, is respected, whatever place he may choose.**

**Good people shine from afar, like the snowy mountains; bad people are not seen, like arrows shot by night.**

*Dhammapada 21:303–4*

**We live happily indeed, not hating those who hate us! among men who hate us we dwell free from hatred!**

**We live happily indeed, free from ailments among the ailing! among men who are ailing let us dwell free from ailments!**

**We live happily indeed, free from greed among the greedy! among men who are greedy let us dwell free from greed!**

**We live happily indeed, though we call nothing our own! We shall be like the bright gods, feeding on happiness!**

**Victory breeds hatred, for the conquered is unhappy. He who has given up both victory and defeat, he, the contented, is happy.**

**There is no fire like passion; there is no losing throw like hatred; there is no pain like this body; there is no happiness higher than rest.**

**Hunger is the worst of diseases, the elements of the body the greatest evil; if one knows this truly, that is Nirvâna, the highest happiness.**

**Health is the greatest of gifts, contentedness the best riches; trust is the best of relationships, Nirvâna the highest happiness.**

*Dhammapada 15:197–204*

**At this period, brethren, there will arise in the world an Exalted One named Maitreye, Arahant, Fully Awakened, abounding in wisdom and goodness, happy with knowledge of the worlds, unsurpassed as a guide to mortals willing to be led, a teacher for gods and men, an Exalted One, a Buddha, even as I am now. . . . The truth, lovely in its origin, lovely in its progress, lovely in its consummation, will he proclaim, both in the spirit and in the letter, the higher life will he make known, in all its fullness and in all its purity, even as I do now.**

*Digha Nikaya 26:25*

In the New Testament, the Sacred Text of Christianity, we read the following words uttered by Jesus Christ, Whose Mission began around 30 AD:

**Blessed *are* the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

**Blessed *are* they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.**

**Blessed *are* the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.**

**Blessed *are* they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.**

**Blessed *are* the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.**

**Blessed *are* the pure in heart: for they shall see God.**

**Blessed *are* the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God.**

**Blessed *are* they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.**

**Blessed are ye, when *men* shall revile you, and persecute *you,* and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake.**

**Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great *is* your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.**

**Ye are the salt of the earth: but if the salt have lost his savor, wherewith shall it be salted? it is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men.**

**Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid.**

**Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house.**

**Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.**

*Matthew 5:3–16*

**And he spake many things unto them in parables, saying, Behold, a sower went forth to sow;**

**And when he sowed, some *seeds* fell by the way side, and the fowls came and devoured them up:**

**Some fell upon stony places, where they had not much earth: and forthwith they sprung up, because they had no deepness of earth:**

**And when the sun was up, they were scorched; and because they had no root, they withered away.**

**And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them:**

**But other fell into good ground, and brought forth fruit, some an hundredfold, some sixtyfold, some thirtyfold.**

**Who hath ears to hear, let him hear. . . .**

**Hear ye therefore the parable of the sower.**

**When any one heareth the word of the kingdom, and understandeth *it* not, then cometh the wicked *one*, and catcheth away that which was sown in his heart. This is he which received seed by the way side.**

**But he that received the seed into stony places, the same is he that heareth the word, and anon with joy receiveth it;**

**Yet hath he not root in himself, but dureth for a while: for when tribulation or persecution ariseth because of the word, by and by he is offended.**

**He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful.**

**But he that received seed into the good ground is he that heareth the word, and understandeth *it*; which also beareth fruit, and bringeth forth, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.**

*Matthew 13:3–9, 18–23*

**I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now.**

**Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth: . . .**

*John 16:12–13*

**For the Son of man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works.**

*Matthew 16:27*

And in the Qur'án, the Holy Book of Islam, revealed by Muḥammad around 600 AD, we read:

**God is the light of the Heavens and of the Earth. His Light is like a niche in which is a lamp—the lamp encased in glass—the glass, as it were, a glistening star. From a blessed tree is it lighted, the olive neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil would well nigh shine out, even though fire touched it not! It is light upon light. God guideth whom He will to His light, and God setteth forth parables to men, for God knoweth all things.**

*Qur'án 24:35*

**And whoso maketh efforts for us, in our ways will we guide them: for God is assuredly with those who do righteous deeds.**

*Qur'án 29:69*

**Truly the men who resign themselves to God, and the women who resign themselves, and the believing men and the believing women, and the devout men and the devout women, and the men of truth, and the women of truth, and the patient men and the patient women, and the humble men and the humble women, and the men who give alms and the women who give alms, and the men who fast and the women who fast, and the chaste men and the chaste women, and the men and the women who oft remember God: for them hath God prepared forgiveness and a rich recompense.**

*Qur'án 33:35*

**But love will the God of Mercy vouchsafe to those who believe and do the things that be right.**

*Qur'án 19:96*

**And hold ye fast by the cord of God, all of you, and break not loose from it; and remember God's goodness towards you, how that when ye were enemies, He united your hearts, and by his favor ye became brethren;**

**And when ye were on the brink of the pit of fire, he drew you back from it. Thus God clearly sheweth you his signs that ye may be guided;**

**And that there may be among you a people who invite to the Good, and enjoin the Just, and forbid the Wrong. These are they with whom it shall be well.**

*Qur'án 3:103–4*

**God! nought that is in Earth or that is in Heaven, is hidden unto Him. He it is who formeth you in your mothers' wombs. There is no god but He; the Mighty, the Wise!**

**He it is who hath sent down to thee "the Book." Some of its signs are of themselves perspicuous;—these are the basis of the Book—and others are figurative. But they whose hearts are given to err, follow its figures, craving discord, craving an interpretation; yet none knoweth its interpretation but God. And the stable in knowledge say, "We believe in it: it is all from our Lord." But none will bear this in mind, save men endued with understanding.**

**O our Lord! suffer not our hearts to go astray after that thou hast once guided us, and give us mercy from before thee; for verily thou art He who giveth.**

**O our Lord! For the day of whose coming there is not a doubt, thou wilt surely gather mankind together. Verily, God will not fail the promise.**

*Qur'án 3:5–9*

## SECTION 29

As you have noticed in reading the above selection of Sacred Texts, all the past Manifestations of God foretold the coming of the Day of God, a day when the peoples of the world would be united, when wars and misery would disappear, and peace would be established on earth. Such prophecies, of course, point to the advent of Bahá'u'lláh. The Báb, Who was not merely the Precursor of the Bahá'í Revelation but ranks "as one of the self-sufficient Manifestations of God", offered His very life in the pathway of Bahá'u'lláh. The Bayán, the

Mother Book of His Dispensation, is the title given by Him to His Book of laws. It has been, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá affirms, “superseded by the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, except in respect of such laws as have been confirmed and mentioned in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas.” The Guardian indicates that the Bayán should be regarded “primarily as a eulogy of the Promised One rather than a code of laws and ordinances designed to be a permanent guide to future generations.”

The Writings of the Báb are of a very special nature. The Tablet below is addressed by the Báb to Bahá’u’lláh, to Whom He refers as “Him Whom God shall make manifest”. In it, the Báb begins speaking from the station of oneness by saying that He is addressing a letter from God unto God. Then He speaks from the station of servitude and affirms that His most Holy Book, the Bayán, and those who believed in Him are but a present from Him to Bahá’u’lláh. “The Day of the Latter Resurrection” refers to the time of the appearance of Bahá’u’lláh. The Báb states that, even if, on that day, Bahá’u’lláh were to dismiss the entire company of the followers of the Bayán, He would be praised for doing so. The Báb then asks that Bahá’u’lláh, as a token of His favor, allow a period of nineteen years to pass before He declares His Mission. Bahá’u’lláh received the first stirrings of God’s Revelation while imprisoned in the Síyáh-Chál of Ṭihrán in 1852, yet He did not make His Mission known until Riḍván 1863, exactly nineteen years after the Báb’s declaration.

**He is the Most Glorious.**

**“He is God, no God is there but Him, the Almighty, the Best-Beloved. All that are in the heavens and on the earth and whatever lieth between them are His. Verily He is the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting.**

**“This is a letter from God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting, unto God, the Almighty, the Best-Beloved, to affirm that the Bayán and such as bear allegiance to it are but a present from me unto Thee and to express my undoubting faith that there is no God but Thee, that the kingdoms of Creation and Revelation are Thine, that no one can attain anything save by Thy power and that He Whom Thou hast raised up is but Thy servant and Thy Testimony. I, indeed, beg to address Him Whom God shall make manifest, by Thy leave in these words: ‘Shouldst Thou dismiss the entire company of the followers of the Bayán in the Day of the Latter Resurrection by a mere sign of Thy finger even while still a suckling babe, Thou wouldst indeed be praised in Thy indication. And though no doubt is there about it, do Thou grant a respite of nineteen years as a token of Thy favor so that those who have embraced this Cause may be graciously rewarded by Thee. Thou art verily the Lord of grace abounding. Thou dost indeed suffice every created thing and causest it to be independent of all things, while nothing in the heavens or on the earth or that which lieth between them can ever suffice Thee.’**

**“Verily Thou art the Self-Sufficient, the All-Knowing; Thou art indeed potent over all things.”**[134]

## SECTION 30

That the eternal Covenant is an inestimable bounty conferred on all the peoples of the earth is clear from what we have studied thus far. Through the energies released by successive

Revelations, humanity has received an increasing measure of Divine light and been endowed with a growing capacity to advance civilization according to God's Will and purpose. We should therefore ask, How can we ensure that we fulfill our part in the eternal Covenant, in this agreement between God and each of us, welded into our very being? The opening passages of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas address this question in the clearest terms:

> **"The first duty prescribed by God for His servants is the recognition of Him Who is the Dayspring of His Revelation and the Fountain of His laws, Who representeth the Godhead in both the Kingdom of His Cause and the world of creation. Whoso achieveth this duty hath attained unto all good; and whoso is deprived thereof hath gone astray, though he be the author of every righteous deed. It behooveth everyone who reacheth this most sublime station, this summit of transcendent glory, to observe every ordinance of Him Who is the Desire of the world. These twin duties are inseparable. Neither is acceptable without the other. Thus hath it been decreed by Him Who is the Source of Divine inspiration.**
>
> **"They whom God hath endued with insight will readily recognize that the precepts laid down by God constitute the highest means for the maintenance of order in the world and the security of its peoples. He that turneth away from them is accounted among the abject and foolish. We, verily, have commanded you to refuse the dictates of your evil passions and corrupt desires, and not to transgress the bounds which the Pen of the Most High hath fixed, for these are the breath of life unto all created things."[135]**

On so many occasions in this sequence of courses we have thought about the inseparable twin duties of recognition and obedience and their implications for the life of the individual. In the first unit of Book 7, we tried to gain insights into the nature of spiritual growth and, in this context, examined such attributes as love, knowledge, faith and certitude, hope, and longing desire. Central to our discussions was the consideration of the twin duties as described in the opening passage above from the Kitáb-i-Aqdas. You may wish to discuss in your group, in light of your reflections on the theme of the eternal Covenant of God and the experience you have gained since studying Book 7, the nature of the intimate connection between recognition of God's Manifestation and observance of His laws, and their inseparability.

## SECTION 31

We know that, once we have recognized the Manifestation of God, our greatest duty is to follow His commandments. Yet, distracted by a world that is often forgetful of God, and subject to the constant promptings of the ego, from where do we find the strength to remain steadfast in His Covenant? What force keeps our feet firm on the straight path and enables us to observe His laws? Love is clearly one such force. The call in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas "Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty" points to the inexhaustible source of our motivation:

> **"O ye peoples of the world! Know assuredly that My commandments are the lamps of My loving providence among My servants, and the keys of My mercy for My creatures. Thus hath it been sent down from the heaven of the Will of your Lord, the Lord of Revelation. Were any man to taste the sweetness of the words which the lips of the All-Merciful have willed to utter, he would, though the treasures of the earth be in his possession, renounce them one and all, that he might vindicate the truth of even one of His commandments, shining above the Dayspring of His bountiful care and loving-kindness.**
>
> **"Say: From My laws the sweet-smelling savor of My garment can be smelled, and by their aid the standards of Victory will be planted upon the highest peaks. The Tongue of My power hath, from the heaven of My omnipotent glory, addressed to My creation these words: 'Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty.' Happy is the lover that hath inhaled the divine fragrance of his Best-Beloved from these words, laden with the perfume of a grace which no tongue can describe. By My life! He who hath drunk the choice wine of fairness from the hands of My bountiful favor will circle around My commandments that shine above the Dayspring of My creation.**
>
> **"Think not that We have revealed unto you a mere code of laws. Nay, rather, We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power. To this beareth witness that which the Pen of Revelation hath revealed. Meditate upon this, O men of insight!"**[136]

The above quotation speaks to us about the nature of the laws of God, which are described as "lamps" of His "loving providence", as "keys" of His "mercy", as "the choice Wine" which has been unsealed by "the fingers of might and power", and it sheds light on the significance of obedience to these laws. It is suggested that you meditate on the passage and then write a short paragraph articulating a few thoughts about our love for the Most Great Beauty as a force that compels us to observe His laws.

No reflection on the above quotation can fail to recognize that living in obedience to God's commandments, motivated by our love for His beauty, is a most joyous state of being. We should remember, then, as we mentioned when we began this course, that our relationship with God is ultimately one of love and that knowledge of God is intimately connected to love for Him. You and the other members of your group may now wish to read through the verses below from the Hidden Words, which, no matter how well familiar to us, always touch our hearts and disclose to us new vistas of understanding.

**"O Son of Man! Veiled in My immemorial being and in the ancient eternity of My essence, I knew My love for thee; therefore I created thee, have engraved on thee Mine image and revealed to thee My beauty."**[137]

**"O Son of Spirit! My claim on thee is great, it cannot be forgotten. My grace to thee is plenteous, it cannot be veiled. My love hath made in thee its home, it cannot be concealed. My light is manifest to thee, it cannot be obscured."**[138]

**"O Son of Being! My love is My stronghold; he that entereth therein is safe and secure, and he that turneth away shall surely stray and perish."**[139]

**"O Son of Man! I loved thy creation, hence I created thee. Wherefore, do thou love Me, that I may name thy name and fill thy soul with the spirit of life."**[140]

**"O Son of Being! Thy Paradise is My love; thy heavenly home, reunion with Me. Enter therein and tarry not. This is that which hath been destined for thee in Our kingdom above and Our exalted dominion."**[141]

**"O Son of Man! If thou lovest Me, turn away from thyself; and if thou seekest My pleasure, regard not thine own; that thou mayest die in Me and I may eternally live in thee."[142]**

**"O Son of Being! Walk in My statutes for love of Me and deny thyself that which thou desirest if thou seekest My pleasure."[143]**

**"O Son of Man! Neglect not My commandments if thou lovest My beauty, and forget not My counsels if thou wouldst attain My good pleasure."[144]**

**"O Son of Being! Love Me, that I may love thee. If thou lovest Me not, My love can in no wise reach thee. Know this, O servant."[145]**

**"O Son of the Wondrous Vision! I have breathed within thee a breath of My own Spirit, that thou mayest be My lover. Why hast thou forsaken Me and sought a beloved other than Me?"[146]**

**"O Befriended Stranger! The candle of thine heart is lighted by the hand of My power, quench it not with the contrary winds of self and passion. The healer of all thine ills is remembrance of Me, forget it not. Make My love thy treasure and cherish it even as thy very sight and life."[147]**

**"O Son of Justice! Whither can a lover go but to the land of his beloved? and what seeker findeth rest away from his heart's desire? To the true lover reunion is life, and separation is death. His breast is void of patience and his heart hath no peace. A myriad lives he would forsake to hasten to the abode of his beloved."[148]**

You surely know some of the above passages by heart already. Nevertheless, you may wish to make it a habit to memorize an increasing number of verses from the Hidden Words, which Bahá'u'lláh has revealed so that we may stand faithful to the Covenant of God. You have no doubt read many times the following passage from His Pen, describing this small volume:

**"This is that which hath descended from the realm of glory, uttered by the tongue of power and might, and revealed unto the Prophets of old. We have taken the inner essence thereof and clothed it in the garment of brevity, as a token of grace unto the righteous, that they may stand faithful unto the Covenant of God, may fulfill in their lives His trust, and in the realm of spirit obtain the gem of Divine virtue."[149]**

## SECTION 32

With all that we have studied in this unit—with our reflections on the attributes of God and the way our souls are to respond to the infinite bounties they confer upon us, with the insights we have gained into the nature of progressive revelation and the unfoldment of God's Will and purpose for humanity through His successive Manifestations, with our discussion of the inseparable twin duties of recognition and obedience in the forefront of our minds—let us now return to the question of the purpose of our lives to know God and to worship Him. We have said that God has endowed every soul with the capacity to fulfill this purpose. Therefore, the pursuit of knowledge, above all the knowledge of God revealed through His Manifestation

for this Day, is the most central concern of our lives. His words enable us to ascend into the heavens of Divine knowledge and scale the heights of God's love. We must strive to hear His melodies with our inner ear and see His beauty with our inner eye. And we should always remember that the acquisition of knowledge must be accompanied by true understanding, which, the opening passages of the Kitáb-i-Íqán make clear, requires certain conditions:

> **"No man shall attain the shores of the ocean of true understanding except he be detached from all that is in heaven and on earth. Sanctify your souls, O ye peoples of the world, that haply ye may attain that station which God hath destined for you and enter thus the tabernacle which, according to the dispensations of Providence, hath been raised in the firmament of the Bayán.**
>
> **"The essence of these words is this: they that tread the path of faith, they that thirst for the wine of certitude, must cleanse themselves of all that is earthly—their ears from idle talk, their minds from vain imaginings, their hearts from worldly affections, their eyes from that which perisheth. They should put their trust in God, and, holding fast unto Him, follow in His way. Then will they be made worthy of the effulgent glories of the sun of divine knowledge and understanding, and become the recipients of a grace that is infinite and unseen, inasmuch as man can never hope to attain unto the knowledge of the All-Glorious, can never quaff from the stream of divine knowledge and wisdom, can never enter the abode of immortality, nor partake of the cup of divine nearness and favor, unless and until he ceases to regard the words and deeds of mortal men as a standard for the true understanding and recognition of God and His Prophets."[150]**

How infinitely blessed we feel upon realizing that as we strive to fulfill our part in the eternal Covenant of God we attain unto the City of Certitude and enter its gates, the City that has been bequeathed unto us as our true home:

> **"Only when the lamp of search, of earnest striving, of longing desire, of passionate devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy, is kindled within the seeker's heart, and the breeze of His loving-kindness is wafted upon his soul, will the darkness of error be dispelled, the mists of doubts and misgivings be dissipated, and the lights of knowledge and certitude envelop his being. At that hour will the mystic Herald, bearing the joyful tidings of the Spirit, shine forth from the City of God resplendent as the morn, and, through the trumpet-blast of knowledge, will awaken the heart, the soul, and the spirit from the slumber of negligence. Then will the manifold favors and outpouring grace of the holy and everlasting Spirit confer such new life upon the seeker that he will find himself endowed with a new eye, a new ear, a new heart, and a new mind. He will contemplate the manifest signs of the universe, and will penetrate the hidden mysteries of the soul. Gazing with the eye of God, he will perceive within every atom a door that leadeth him to the stations of absolute certitude. He will discover in all things the mysteries of divine Revelation and the evidences of an everlasting manifestation.**
>
> **"I swear by God! Were he that treadeth the path of guidance and seeketh to scale the heights of righteousness to attain unto this glorious and supreme station, he would inhale at a distance of a thousand leagues the fragrance of God, and would perceive the resplendent morn of a divine Guidance rising above the dayspring of all things. Each and every thing, however small, would be to him a revelation**

**leading him to his Beloved, the Object of his quest. So great shall be the discernment of this seeker that he will discriminate between truth and falsehood even as he doth distinguish the sun from shadow. If in the uttermost corners of the East the sweet savors of God be wafted, he will assuredly recognize and inhale their fragrance, even though he be dwelling in the uttermost ends of the West. He will likewise clearly distinguish all the signs of God—His wondrous utterances, His great works, and mighty deeds—from the doings, words and ways of men, even as the jeweler who knoweth the gem from the stone, or the man who distinguisheth the spring from autumn and heat from cold. When the channel of the human soul is cleansed of all worldly and impeding attachments, it will unfailingly perceive the breath of the Beloved across immeasurable distances, and will, led by its perfume, attain and enter the City of Certitude. Therein he will discern the wonders of His ancient wisdom, and will perceive all the hidden teachings from the rustling leaves of the Tree—which flourisheth in that City. With both his inner and his outer ear he will hear from its dust the hymns of glory and praise ascending unto the Lord of Lords, and with his inner eye will he discover the mysteries of 'return' and 'revival'. How unspeakably glorious are the signs, the tokens, the revelations, and splendors which He Who is the King of names and attributes hath destined for that City! The attainment of this City quencheth thirst without water, and kindleth the love of God without fire. Within every blade of grass are enshrined the mysteries of an inscrutable wisdom, and upon every rosebush a myriad nightingales pour out, in blissful rapture, their melody. Its wondrous tulips unfold the mystery of the undying Fire in the Burning Bush, and its sweet savors of holiness breathe the perfume of the Messianic Spirit. It bestoweth wealth without gold, and conferreth immortality without death. In every leaf ineffable delights are treasured, and within every chamber unnumbered mysteries lie hidden.**

**"They that valiantly labor in quest of God will, when once they have renounced all else but Him, be so attached and wedded to that City that a moment's separation from it would to them be unthinkable. They will hearken unto infallible proofs from the Hyacinth of that assembly, and receive the surest testimonies from the beauty of its Rose and the melody of its Nightingale. Once in about a thousand years shall this City be renewed and readorned.**

**". . . That City is none other than the Word of God revealed in every age and dispensation. In the days of Moses it was the Pentateuch; in the days of Jesus the Gospel; in the days of Muḥammad the Messenger of God the Qur'án; in this day the Bayán; and in the dispensation of Him Whom God will make manifest His own Book—the Book unto which all the Books of former Dispensations must needs be referred, the Book which standeth amongst them all transcendent and supreme."**[151]

As you reflect on the two opening passages of the Kitáb-i-Íqán, the Book of Certitude, you may find it helpful to complete the following sentences, drawn from the text.

a. No man shall _____ the shores of the _____ of _____ _____ except he be _____ from all that is in _____ and on _____ .

b. Those that tread the _____ , that thirst for the _____ _____ , must _____ of all that is _____—their ears from _____ , their minds from _____ , their hearts from _____ _____ , their eyes from _____ .

c. They should put their _____ in God, and, holding _____ _____ , follow in His _____ .

d. They will then be made _____ of the _____ of the sun of _____ and _____ and will become the _____ of a _____ that is _____ and _____ .

e. No man can ever hope to attain unto the _____ of the _____ _____ , can ever quaff from the _____ of _____ _____ and _____ , can ever enter the _____ of _____ , or partake of the _____ of _____ and _____ , unless and until he ceases to regard the _____ and _____ of _____ as a _____ for the _____ _____ and _____ of God and His Prophets.

Now, you may wish to complete the following sentences to assist in your reflections on the four paragraphs above:

a. Only when the lamp of _____ , of earnest _____ , of longing _____ , of passionate _____ , of fervid _____ , of _____ , and _____ , is _____ within the seeker's _____ , and the breeze of His _____ is _____ upon his _____ , will the darkness of error be _____ , the mists of doubts and misgivings be _____ , and the lights of knowledge and certitude _____ . At that hour the mystic _____ , bearing the _____ of the Spirit, will shine forth from the _____ resplendent as the morn, and, through the trumpet-blast of _____ , the _____ , the _____ , and the _____ will _____ from the slumber of _____ . The manifold _____ and outpouring _____ of the holy and everlasting _____ will confer such new life upon the _____ that he will find himself _____ with a new _____ , a new

_____ , a new _____ , and a new _____ . He will _____ the manifest _____ of the universe, and will _____ the hidden _____ of the soul. Gazing with the eye of God, he will _____ within every atom a _____ that _____ him to the stations of _____ . He will _____ in all things the _____ of divine _____ and the _____ of an everlasting _____ .

b. Were he that treads the path of _____ and seeks to scale the heights of _____ to attain unto this _____ and _____ _____ , he would _____ at a distance of a thousand leagues the _____ , and would _____ the _____ rising above the _____ of all things. To him, each and every _____ , however _____ , would be a _____ leading him to his _____ , the _____ of his _____ . The discernment of this _____ will be so _____ that he will _____ between _____ and _____ even as he _____ the _____ from _____ . If in the _____ of the _____ the _____ of God be _____ , he will assuredly _____ and _____ their fragrance, even though he be dwelling in the _____ of the _____ . He will likewise clearly _____ all the _____ of God—His _____ _____ , His _____ , and _____—from the _____ , _____ and _____ of men, even as the jeweler who _____ the _____ from the _____ , or the man who _____ the _____ from _____ and _____ from _____ .

c. When the _____ of the human soul is _____ of all _____ and _____ , it will unfailingly _____ the _____ of the _____ across immeasurable _____ , and will, _____ by its perfume, _____ and _____ the _____ _____ . Therein he will _____ the wonders of His ancient _____ , and will _____ all the hidden _____ from the rustling leaves of the _____ —which flourishes in that City. With both his _____ and his _____ ear he will _____ from its dust the _____ of _____ and _____ ascending unto the Lord of

Lords, and with his _____ eye he will _____ the _____ of "_____" and "_____" .

d. How unspeakably glorious are the _____ , the _____ , the _____ , and _____ which He Who is the King of names and attributes has _____ for that City! The attainment of this City quenches _____ without _____ , and kindles the _____ without _____ . Within every _____ of _____ are enshrined the _____ of an _____ , and upon every _____ a myriad _____ pour out, in _____ _____ , their _____ . Its _____ unfold the mystery of the _____ in the _____ _____ , and its _____ breathe the perfume of the _____ . It bestows _____ without _____ , and confers _____ without _____ . In every _____ ineffable _____ are treasured, and within every _____ unnumbered mysteries _____ .

e. They that _____ in _____ of God will, when once they have _____ all else but Him, be so _____ and _____ to that _____ that a moment's _____ from it would be _____ to them. They will _____ unto infallible _____ from the Hyacinth of that assembly, and _____ the surest _____ from the _____ of its Rose and the _____ of its Nightingale. Once in about a _____ will this City be _____ and _____ .

f. That City is none other than the _____ revealed in every _____ and _____ .

## SECTION 33

One of the most powerful desires that arises from the depths of the soul of every human being is the desire to be free. Having been born bound to the world of dust, we wish to rise above it and soar to heights which we know are ultimately within our reach. But alas, in trying to satisfy this desire, many go astray and, in the name of freedom, become slaves to worldly passions. It is essential for our spiritual existence and eternal journey towards God, then, to be firm in our conviction that we can find freedom only if we are faithful to the Covenant. We can be free only if we obey the laws brought to us by the Manifestation of God. We can be free only

if we abide by the commandments of God for the love of His beauty. Let us end this course by memorizing the following quotations:

> **"Say: True liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments, little as ye know it. Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty. Happy is the man that hath apprehended the Purpose of God in whatever He hath revealed from the Heaven of His Will that pervadeth all created things. Say: The liberty that profiteth you is to be found nowhere except in complete servitude unto God, the Eternal Truth. Whoso hath tasted of its sweetness will refuse to barter it for all the dominion of earth and heaven."[152]**

> **"O Son of Man! Wert thou to speed through the immensity of space and traverse the expanse of heaven, yet thou wouldst find no rest save in submission to Our command and humbleness before Our Face."[153]**

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21. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXXXIV, par. 3, p. 369.

22. Bahá'u'lláh, *Gems of Divine Mysteries* (Ingleside: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 2023), par. 16, p. 17.

23. From a Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh. (authorized English translation)

24. From "Súriy-i-Vafá" [Tablet to Vafá], published in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, no. 12.21, p. 234.

25. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, par. 65, p. 64.

26. The Báb, in *Bahá'í Prayers*, p. 187; also in "Prayers and Meditations" published in *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, no. 7:45.2, p. 281.

27. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Evanston: Bahá'í Publishing, 2010, 2023 printing), no. 18.1, pp. 56–57.

28. *The Call of the Divine Beloved: Selected Mystical Works of Bahá'u'lláh* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2018), no. 5.1, p. 69.

29. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CLII, par. 1, pp. 409–10.

30. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing, 2003, 2022 printing), Persian no. 11, p. 25.

31. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXVI, par. 10, p. 162; also in "Súriy-i-Mulúk" [Súrih of the Kings], published in *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, par. 46, p. 175.

32. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, par. 35, pp. 38–39.

33. Ibid., par. 178, p. 174.

34. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CVI, par. 1, p. 269; also in a Tablet to Mánikchí Ṣáḥib, published in *The Tabernacle of Unity*, no. 1.4, p. 5.

35. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXIV, par. 1, pp. 179–80.

36. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, Persian no. 33, pp. 33–34.

37. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Social Action: A Compilation Prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice* (Evanston: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 2020, 2023 printing), no. 54 and no. 190, p. 26 and p. 113.

38. *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, no. 72.2, p. 156.

39. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Bahá’í Prayers*, p. 207; also in a Tablet to the Bahá’ís of the United States and Canada, published in *Tablets of the Divine Plan: Revealed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to the North American Bahá’ís* (Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1993, 2006 printing), no. 8.30, p. 57.

40. Bahá’u’lláh, *The Hidden Words*, Arabic no. 3, p. 4.

41. Ibid., Persian no. 29, p. 32.

42. Ibid., Arabic no. 20, pp. 8–9.

43. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, CXLII, par. 4, p. 393.

44. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in *Some Answered Questions*, no. 84.3, pp. 490–91.

45. *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, no. 52.1, p. 132.

46. From a Tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. (authorized English translation)

47. Bahá’u’lláh, in the compilation *Women*, no. 53, p. 42.

48. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, CXXIII, par. 3, p. 331.

49. Ibid., CLII, par. 1, p. 410.

50. Bahá’u’lláh, *The Hidden Words*, Arabic no. 7, p. 5.

51. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, C, par. 10, p. 259.

52. Ibid., CXLIII, par. 1, p. 397.

53. *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, no. 12.3, p. 43.

54. Ibid., no. 10.2, pp. 41–42.

55. Ibid., no. 166.1, p. 274.

56. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh*, XXX, par. 1, p. 91.

57. Ibid., XXXII, par. 2, p. 94.

58. Ibid., XXVI, par. 2, pp. 75–76.

59. *Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*, no. 139.5, pp. 224–25.

60. From "Excerpts from Other Tablets", published in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, no. 17.127, p. 328.

61. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, par. 148, p. 144.

62. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXXIX, par. 1, pp. 354–55.

63. Ibid., V, par. 4, p. 8.

64. *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas* (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1909, 1930 printing), vol. 1, p. 95. (authorized English translation)

65. *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas* (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1915, 1940 printing), vol. 2, p. 294. (authorized English translation)

66. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, no. 155.4, p. 253.

67. Bahá'u'lláh, in *Bahá'í Prayers*, p. 20; also in *Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh*, no. 173.2, p. 294.

68. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXXVIII, par. 9, p. 353.

69. Bahá'u'lláh, in *Bahá'í Prayers*, p. 138; also in *Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh*, no. 76.1, p. 139.

70. *Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh*, no. 153.3, p. 274.

71. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XCV, par. 1, p. 245.

72. *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas*, vol. 1, p. 111. (authorized English translation)

73. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, no. 157.3, p. 259.

74. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, Persian no. 49, p. 39.

75. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXXXVI, par. 6, p. 377.

76. Ibid., CXXX, par. 1, p. 361.

77. From a Tablet of Bahá'u'lláh. (authorized English translation)

78. *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas* (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1916, 1930 printing), vol. 3, p. 642. (authorized English translation)

79. *Light of the World: Selected Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 2021), no. 32.3, p. 81.

80. Ibid., no. 75.1, p. 202.

81. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, no. 153.1, p. 249.

82. Ibid., no. 22.1, pp. 75–76.

83. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XV, par. 1, p. 43.

84. *Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh*, no. 81.4, p. 152.

85. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXLII, par. 2, p. 392.

86. Ibid., C, par. 8, pp. 258–59.

87. Ibid., CXLII, par. 7, pp. 394–95.

88. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, no. 2.10, p. 13.

89. Bahá'u'lláh, in *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Evanston: Bahá'í Publishing, 1993, 2024 printing), par. 184, pp. 87–88.

90. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CLIII, par. 1, p. 411.

91. From "Bishárát" [Glad-Tidings], published in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, no. 3.12, p. 23.

92. From "Lawḥ-i-Ḥikmat" [Tablet of Wisdom], ibid., no. 9.5, p. 170.

93. *Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas*, vol. 2, p. 436. (authorized English translation)

94. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, no. 35.11, pp. 106–7.

95. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Some Answered Questions*, no. 77.2, pp. 437–38.

96. The Báb, in *Bahá'í Prayers*, p. 78; also in "Prayers and Meditations" published in *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, no. 7:14.1, pp. 236–37.

97. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXXXIX, par. 1, pp. 383–84.

98. From "Súriy-i-Haykal" [Súrih of the Temple], published in *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, par. 75, p. 32.

99. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, LXXIV, par. 1, pp. 178–80.

100. *Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh*, no. 88.2, p. 166.

101. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, no. 23.8, p. 78.

102. From a letter dated 17 December 1919 written by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the Central Organization for a Durable Peace, The Hague, published in *Tablet to the Hague* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, n.d.), p. 12; also in *The Bahá'í World: Volume XV, 1968–1973* (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1976), p. 36.

103. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CLXIII, par. 2, pp. 434–35.

104. *Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh*, no. 75.1, pp. 136–37.

105. Ibid., no. 58.3, pp. 97–98.

106. Ibid., no. 38.12, pp. 58–59.

107. Bahá'u'lláh, cited in a letter dated 25 December 1938 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of North America, published under the title *The Advent of Divine Justice* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing, 2006, 2023 printing), par. 113, p. 124.

108. Bahá'u'lláh, in *Bahá'í Prayers*, pp. 218–19; also in *Prayers and Meditations by Bahá'u'lláh*, no. 1.2–3, pp. 1–2.

109. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXVI, par. 1, pp. 74–75.

110. From "Ishráqát" [Splendors], published in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, no. 8.25, p. 135.

111. From a letter dated 5 July 1977 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual.

112. From a letter dated 26 December 1941 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, quoted in "Notes", prepared under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice, in *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book* (Evanston: Bahá'í Publishing, 1993, 2024 printing), no. 33, p. 194.

113. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Bahá'í Scriptures: Selections from the Utterances of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá* (New York: Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1928), p. 479. (authorized English translation)

114. From Lawḥ-i-Ḥikmat [Tablet of Wisdom], published in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, no. 9.17, p. 176.

115. From "Lawḥ-i-Aqdas" [The Most Holy Tablet], ibid., no. 2.23, pp. 15–18.

116. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, par. 104, p. 102; also in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XIX, par. 1, pp. 56–57.

117. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, par. 106, pp. 103–4; also in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XIX, par. 2–3, pp. 57–58.

118. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, par. 109, p. 108; also in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XIX, par. 3, p. 58.

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121. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Some Answered Questions*, no. 33.7–9, pp. 213–14.

122. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, par. 191–92, pp. 184–85; also, in part, in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXII, par. 5, pp. 64–65.

123. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, par. 196, pp. 186–89; also in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXII, par. 8–9, pp. 66–68.

124. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXIII, par. 1–4, pp. 69–72.

125. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, par. 13–15, pp. 13–16.

126. Ibid., par. 47, pp. 47–48.

127. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, XXXIV, par. 5, p. 99.

128. Ibid., par. 6, p. 99.

129. Ibid., p. 100.

130. Ibid.

131. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in *Some Answered Questions*, nos. 43.3 and 43.10, pp. 264–65 and pp. 267–68.

132. Ibid., nos. 11.7, 11.9 and 11.10, pp. 77–79.

133. From a letter dated 11 March 1936 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the West, published in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh: Selected Letters* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1991, 2012 printing), p. 166.

134. From a Tablet addressed to "Him Who Will Be Made Manifest", published in *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, no. 1:2.2–5, pp. 7–9.

135. Bahá'u'lláh, in *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, par. 1–2, pp. 23–24; also in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CLV, par. 1–2, pp. 420–21.

136. Bahá'u'lláh, in *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, par. 3–5, pp. 24–25; also in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CLV, par. 3–5, pp. 422–23.

137. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*, Arabic no. 3, p. 4.

138. Ibid., Arabic no. 20, pp. 8–9.

139. Ibid., Arabic no. 9, p. 5.

140. Ibid., Arabic no. 4, p. 4.

141. Ibid., Arabic no. 6, p. 5.

142. Ibid., Arabic no. 7, p. 5.

143. Ibid., Arabic no. 38, p. 12.

144. Ibid., Arabic no. 39, p. 13.

145. Ibid., Arabic no. 5, p. 4.

146. Ibid., Arabic no. 19, p. 8.

147. Ibid., Persian no. 32, p. 33.

148. Ibid., Persian no. 4, p. 23.

149. Ibid., p. 3.

150. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, par. 1–2, pp. 3–4.

151. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, par. 216–19, pp. 204–8; also in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CXXV, par. 6–11, pp. 338–42.

152. Bahá'u'lláh, in *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, par. 125, pp. 65–66; also in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, CLIX, par. 4, p. 428.

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# Passage to Maturity

## Purpose

To gain an appreciation of the nature of the current historical moment,
in which humanity is passing from its collective childhood into adulthood,
and to examine the forces with which the Bahá'í community
strives to align itself in realizing Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a new World Order

## SECTION 1

In the first unit of this book, we explored several themes fundamental to Bahá'í belief and gained insights into some of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings regarding God and His Manifestations. Although the unit did offer a vision of the unfoldment of religion in human history, much of it was concerned with our personal relationship with the Manifestation—the fulfillment of our search for freedom in recognizing Him and obeying His commandments. In this unit, we will strive to catch a glimpse of the impact Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation will have on the collective life of humanity and will ask ourselves what role our community has to play in advancing the stupendous civilization He has envisaged.

In His Writings and utterances, 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the significance of the age in which we live by comparing the stages that humanity traverses in its evolution to those through which an individual passes in his or her growth and development. You are probably acquainted with the particular passage below; the insights it offers are integral to our understanding of the future that awaits humanity.

> **"All created things have their degree or stage of maturity. The period of maturity in the life of a tree is the time of its fruit-bearing. . . . The animal attains a stage of full growth and completeness, and in the human kingdom man reaches his maturity when the light of his intelligence attains its greatest power and development. . . .**
>
> **"Similarly there are periods and stages in the collective life of humanity. At one time it was passing through its stage of childhood, at another its period of youth, but now it has entered its long-predicted phase of maturity, the evidences of which are everywhere apparent. . . . That which was applicable to human needs during the early history of the race can neither meet nor satisfy the demands of this day, this period of newness and consummation. Humanity has emerged from its former state of limitation and preliminary training. Man must now become imbued with new virtues and powers, new moral standards, new capacities. New bounties, perfect bestowals, are awaiting and already descending upon him. The gifts and blessings of the period of youth, although timely and sufficient during the adolescence of mankind, are now incapable of meeting the requirements of its maturity."[1]**

Shoghi Effendi uses the same analogy to impress on us the magnitude of the changes that must occur in the life of humanity. In one passage we read:

> **"The long ages of infancy and childhood, through which the human race had to pass, have receded into the background. Humanity is now experiencing the commotions invariably associated with the most turbulent stage of its evolution, the stage of adolescence, when the impetuosity of youth and its vehemence reach their climax, and must gradually be superseded by the calmness, the wisdom, and the maturity that characterize the stage of manhood. Then will the human race reach that stature of ripeness which will enable it to acquire all the powers and capacities upon which its ultimate development must depend."[2]**

And in another passage, the Guardian tells us:

**"The ages of its infancy and childhood are past, never again to return, while the Great Age, the consummation of all ages, which must signalize the coming of age of the entire human race, is yet to come. The convulsions of this transitional and most turbulent period in the annals of humanity are the essential prerequisites, and herald the inevitable approach, of that Age of Ages, *'the time of the end,'* in which the folly and tumult of strife that has, since the dawn of history, blackened the annals of mankind, will have been finally transmuted into the wisdom and the tranquility of an undisturbed, a universal, and lasting peace, in which the discord and separation of the children of men will have given way to the worldwide reconciliation, and the complete unification of the divers elements that constitute human society."[3]**

Even though you may be well familiar with the above words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, it is suggested that you reflect on their significance by filling in the blanks in the sentences below.

a. All _____ things, 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us, have their _____ or _____ of _____ .

b. The period of _____ in the _____ of a tree is the _____ of its _____ ; the animal, too, attains a _____ of full _____ and _____ .

c. In the _____ kingdom, man reaches his _____ when the _____ of his _____ attains its greatest _____ and _____ .

d. Similarly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, there are _____ and _____ in the _____ of humanity; at one time it was _____ through its _____ of _____ , at another its _____ of _____ , but now it has _____ its long-predicted _____ of _____ .

e. That which was _____ to humanity's needs during its early _____ , He says, cannot _____ or _____ the _____ of this day, this _____ of _____ and _____ .

f. Humanity has emerged from its _____ of _____ and _____ training, 'Abdu'l-Bahá makes clear. Humanity must now become _____ with new _____ and _____ , new _____ , new _____ . New _____ , _____ , are awaiting and already descending upon humanity. The _____ and _____ of the period of _____ , although _____ and _____ during the _____ of

mankind, are now _____ of meeting the _____ of its _____ .

The analysis provided by Shoghi Effendi in the last two paragraphs above requires contemplation; the following exercise may prove helpful in your reflections:

a. In the first passage, the Guardian tells us that the long ages of _____ and _____ , through which the human race _____ , have receded _____ .

b. Humanity is now experiencing the _____ invariably associated with the _____ , the stage of _____ , when the _____ of youth and its _____ reach their _____ , and must gradually be _____ by the _____ , the _____ , and the _____ that characterize the _____ .

c. Shoghi Effendi explains that, after passing through the commotions associated with its collective adolescence, the human race will reach that stature of _____ which will enable it to acquire all the _____ and _____ upon which its _____ must depend.

d. In the second passage, the Guardian makes clear that the ages of humanity's _____ and _____ are past, never again to return, while the _____ , the _____ of all ages, which must signalize the _____ of the entire human race, is yet to come.

e. He indicates, moreover, that the convulsions of this _____ and _____ period in the annals of humanity are the _____ , and herald the _____ _____ , of the Age of Ages, in which the _____ and _____ _____ that has, since the dawn of history, _____ the annals of mankind, will have been finally _____ into the _____ and the _____ of an _____ , a _____ , and _____ , in which the _____ and _____ of the children of men will have given way to the worldwide _____ , and the complete _____ _____ _____ .

## SECTION 2

In considering the implications of the above quotations, we need to reflect further on humanity's passage to maturity. To begin, let us consider certain changes that occur when an individual leaves behind the habits of childhood and adolescence.

We often say that a child is easily distracted. As one moves towards maturity, this tendency gives way to the ability to focus, to prioritize, and to sustain purposeful activity. We also attribute to childhood the tendency to act according to the emotion of the moment. Over time, this is replaced by the ability to clarify and refine emotions, to measure consequences, and to adopt long-term perspectives; the adult is expected to act thoughtfully and according to principle. With the aid of appropriate education, a person acquires discernment and good judgment and ceases to be fooled by pretentious speech. And, as inherent nobility is thus cultivated, preoccupation with one's own affairs and interests is set aside; altruism and sincere concern for the welfare of one's fellow human beings commands attention.

In the passage below, 'Abdu'l-Bahá reminds us that the powers associated with adulthood appear only gradually as the individual passes through successive stages of growth.

> **"The embryo gradually grows and develops until it is born, and thereafter it continues to grow and develop until it reaches the stage of maturity. Although in infancy the signs of the mind and the spirit are already present in man, they do not appear in a state of perfection, and remain incomplete. But when man attains maturity, the mind and the spirit manifest themselves in the utmost perfection.**
>
> **". . . It is even as the seed: The tree exists within it but is hidden and concealed; when the seed grows and develops, the tree appears in its fullness. In like manner, the growth and development of all beings proceeds by gradual degrees. This is the universal and divinely ordained law and the natural order. The seed does not suddenly become the tree; the embryo does not at once become the man; the mineral substance does not in a moment become the stone: No, all these grow and develop gradually until they attain the limit of perfection."**[4]

'Abdu'l-Bahá also explains that the same heavenly attributes associated with childhood, such as purity of heart, honesty and sincerity, must distinguish the adult—this, however, not out of innocence but out of conscious effort and the exercise of one's powers:

> **". . . Christ has addressed the world, saying, 'Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven'—that is, men must become pure in heart to know God. . . . The hearts of all children are of the utmost purity. They are mirrors upon which no dust has fallen. But this purity is on account of weakness and innocence, not on account of any strength and testing, for as this is the early period of their childhood, their hearts and minds are unsullied by the world. They cannot display any great intelligence. They have neither hypocrisy nor deceit. This is on account of the child's weakness, whereas the man becomes pure through his strength. Through the power of intelligence he becomes simple; through the great power of reason and understanding and not through the power of weakness he becomes sincere."**[5]

In the following passage, the Universal House of Justice states that the Bahá'í community is dedicated to learning how to apply the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh to the life of society and to bringing principles suited to humanity's age of maturity to bear on the conditions of the peoples of the world:

> **"Bahá'u'lláh has appeared to humanity in this period of its adolescence, when it is in need of maturation. . . . He has provided the means for establishing the unity of humankind, the hallmark of a mature world. What will bind the hearts of all people together is the power of the Word of God. That Word has generative power which in every age has provided the means for refining human character and reordering human affairs. The mission of the Bahá'ís is to learn to apply the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh in their individual and collective lives and in the life of their society. Through well-ordered efforts and in collaboration with many others who are dedicated to bettering the world, Bahá'ís bring the principles suited to humanity's age of maturity to bear on the conditions of the world's peoples. They strive for the transformation of the inner and outer realities of human life, and for the cultivation of spiritual and social conditions that will give rise to a new kind of people and a new society founded on unity."[6]**

With the help of the insights gained from the above quotations, we may now ask ourselves, over the next several sections, What will replace certain habits and tendencies associated with the childhood of humanity as it moves towards maturity?

## SECTION 3

The pursuit of self-interest is one of the tendencies clearly discernible in every society. You are familiar with these words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá from your study of earlier books in this sequence:

> **"Today, all the peoples of the world are indulging in self-interest and exert the utmost effort and endeavor to promote their own material interests. They are worshipping themselves and not the divine reality, nor the world of mankind. They seek diligently their own benefit and not the common weal. This is because they are captives of the world of nature and unaware of the divine teachings, of the bounty of the Kingdom and of the Sun of Truth."[7]**

Reflection on the above quotation, and any similar ones you find, will assist your group in discussing the following: That the self-indulgence so pervasive today has been accompanied by a gradual decline in the understanding of right and wrong is not surprising. As extreme relativism, promoted by various philosophies and theories, has gained ascendancy, individuals have been encouraged to determine their own moral preferences. Any standard of morality that tries to curb desire is considered harmful, not only to the individual but to society as a whole. In today's society, "what makes me feel good" has become a key criterion by which judgments about right and wrong—in fact, about most issues in life—are made. What will replace this habit of self-indulgence as humanity approaches its maturity? And what will guide our judgments? Write some of your conclusions in the space below.

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## SECTION 4

The Guardian, in a message sent to the Bahá'í world on the eve of the launching of the Ten Year Crusade, described in these words the forces engulfing the inhabitants of cities and towns in which the "legions of the army of Bahá'u'lláh" were destined to labor: "crass materialism", "aggressive racialism", "haughty intellectualism", "blind and militant nationalism", "narrow and intolerant ecclesiasticism". To these can be added the forces of moral laxity, superstition, corruption, ingrained prejudice, and apathy delineated in many of his other messages. In humanity's passage to maturity, such destructive forces, which disrupt the fortunes of the peoples and nations of the world, must be dissipated and the operation of the constructive yet more powerful forces released by Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation must come to safeguard human dignity and regulate individual and collective conduct.

When we try to analyze the forces that perpetuate the tendencies and habits of humanity's adolescence, it becomes increasingly apparent how rampant materialism is impeding the movement towards maturity. The Guardian tells us that "pervading all departments of life" is

> **"the crass materialism, which lays excessive and ever-increasing emphasis on material well-being, forgetful of those things of the spirit on which alone a sure and stable foundation can be laid for human society. It is this same cancerous materialism, born originally in Europe, carried to excess in the North American continent, contaminating the Asiatic peoples and nations, spreading its ominous tentacles to the borders of Africa, and now invading its very heart, which Bahá'u'lláh in unequivocal and emphatic language denounced in His Writings . . ."[8]**

And a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice provides the following insight:

> **"One of the signs of a decadent society, a sign which is very evident in the world today, is an almost frenetic devotion to pleasure and diversion, an insatiable thirst for amusement, a fanatical devotion to games and sport, a reluctance to treat any matter seriously, and a scornful, derisory attitude towards virtue and solid worth. . . . Frivolity palls and eventually leads to boredom and emptiness, but true happiness and joy and humor that are parts of a balanced life that includes serious thought, compassion and humble servitude to God are characteristics that enrich life and add to its radiance."[9]**

Discuss with your group the meaning of the phrase "crass materialism", in the context of the first quotation from the Guardian. Write some of your thoughts below.

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Now, the rise in materialism across the globe is not a phenomenon that simply happens by itself. Materialistic tenets and beliefs are relentlessly propagated. Propaganda, both political and commercial, has become a formidable force in society. A sophisticated machinery of communication aided by a mounting knowledge of mass psychology is behind it; people from all walks of life are becoming addicted to its stimuli and conditioned to respond to them. Discuss the following questions and write some of your conclusions in the spaces provided:

a. What are some of the materialistic tenets and beliefs that are propagated through various means of communication?

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b. What types of stimuli are used by various means of communication to capture the attention of large numbers of people, and what kinds of uniform responses does such repeated stimulation elicit?

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You would agree that mass media today, in its ceaseless propagation of the dogma of materialism, contributes to the degradation of the powers of the mind; it numbs the inner senses and stifles the susceptibilities of the human heart. Clearly, during humanity's passage to maturity, the structures and processes that shape mass media will have to be entirely reshaped through the application of spiritual principles. Truthfulness, fair-mindedness, freedom from malice and prejudice, and the pursuit of justice and unity are among the principles that will have to guide inquiry into facts and their dissemination. In this journey, human beings, too, will have to overcome the tendency to mindlessly respond to attractive but false stimuli and learn to direct their energies towards those goals that conduce to true happiness and the advancement of society. What would help individuals, groups, and communities to overcome this tendency?

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## SECTION 5

Inability to think profoundly about important issues facing individuals and communities, exacerbated by the distractions that the social environment creates, is another characteristic of this age of transition. In a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi, we read:

> **"People today indeed do tend to be very superficial in their thinking, and it would seem as if the educational systems in use are sorely lacking in ability to produce a mature mind in a person who has reached supposedly adult life! All the outside influences that surround the individual seem to have an intensely distracting effect, and it is a hard job to get the average person to do any deep thinking or even a little meditation on the problems facing him and the world at large."[10]**

In its Riḍván 2010 message to the Bahá'í world, the Universal House of Justice states:

> **"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 skillful at appealing to superficial emotions."[11]**

And, in its Riḍván 2018 message, referring to those places where the educational endeavors of the training institute are taking root, the House of Justice writes:

> **"In these places, the training institute is learning to ensure that sufficient human resources are being raised up to provide for the spiritual and moral edification of children and junior youth in ever-increasing numbers. Participation in these foundational activities is becoming so embedded in the culture of the population that it is viewed as an indispensable aspect of the life of a community. A new vitality emerges within a people taking charge of their own development, and they build immunity to those societal forces that breed passivity. Possibilities for material and spiritual progress take shape. Social reality begins to transform."[12]**

We can clearly see that all the outside influences which surround human beings during this age of transition have an intensely distracting effect. It would be worthwhile to give some thought to the nature of this distraction. Answering the following questions will assist you in your reflections:

a. How does a desire to be entertained, which is nurtured with increasing efficiency in individuals from childhood, create passivity?

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b. How does attraction to things that appeal to superficial emotions distract individuals from pursuing the twofold purpose that we have discussed on so many other occasions?

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c. How do passivity and superficiality feed the tendency to be distracted?

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d. What are some of the features of the social, economic, political, and educational systems that keep humanity in a state of distraction?

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e. How does being in a state of distraction rob individuals of the ability to think profoundly about the problems facing them and the world at large?

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You have by now given much thought to the nature of the educational endeavors of the training institute. Read once again the above guidance of the Universal House of Justice. In what way are these endeavors helping to build immunity to the societal forces that breed passivity in the peoples of the world?

## SECTION 6

The preceding three sections were meant to highlight only a few of the many characteristics of our times that will have to give way to new ones suitable to humanity's age of maturity. There are two characteristics, however, that merit more thorough attention in this unit. The first is the tendency to think and act in extremes. The second is the habit of reducing concepts to simplistic and rigid statements and then holding them in opposition to each other. These two characteristics are related but not the same. As we examine these two tendencies, you are encouraged to think about how participation in the courses of the institute enables us to recognize their expressions in our social environment and to develop the capacity to overcome them.

As to the first, a mature humanity will have learned to work according to the principle of moderation. The quotations below help us to reflect on this all-important principle. Bahá'u'lláh tells us:

> **"In all matters moderation is desirable. If a thing is carried to excess, it will prove a source of evil."[13]**

In the context of human utterance, Bahá'u'lláh speaks of moderation in these terms:

> **"Say: Human utterance is an essence which aspireth to exert its influence and needeth moderation. As to its influence, this is conditional upon refinement which in turn is dependent upon hearts which are detached and pure. As to its moderation, this hath to be combined with tact and wisdom as prescribed in the Holy Scriptures and Tablets. Meditate upon that which hath streamed forth from the heaven of the Will of thy Lord, He Who is the Source of all grace, that thou**

**mayest grasp the intended meaning which is enshrined in the sacred depths of the Holy Writings."[14]**

Describing the attributes of one who has scaled the heights of learning, 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to the need for the individual to "oppose his passions". "How wonderful", He writes, "are the implications of this deceptively easy, all-inclusive phrase." And He continues:

**"This is the very foundation of every laudable human quality; indeed, these few words embody the light of the world, the impregnable basis of all the spiritual attributes of human beings. This is the balance wheel of all behavior, the means of keeping all man's good qualities in equilibrium.**

**"For desire is a flame that has reduced to ashes uncounted lifetime harvests of the learned, a devouring fire that even the vast sea of their accumulated knowledge could never quench. How often has it happened that an individual who was graced with every attribute of humanity and wore the jewel of true understanding, nevertheless followed after his passions until his excellent qualities passed beyond moderation and he was forced into excess. His pure intentions changed to evil ones, his attributes were no longer put to uses worthy of them, and the power of his desires turned him aside from righteousness and its rewards into ways that were dangerous and dark. A good character is in the sight of God and His chosen ones and the possessors of insight, the most excellent and praiseworthy of all things, but always on condition that its center of emanation should be reason and knowledge and its base should be true moderation."[15]**

The passage below written by the Guardian, discussing individual conduct, provides a similar warning:

**"Such a chaste and holy life, with its implications of modesty, purity, temperance, decency, and clean-mindedness, involves no less than the exercise of moderation in all that pertains to dress, language, amusements, and all artistic and literary avocations. . . . It calls for the abandonment of a frivolous conduct, with its excessive attachment to trivial and often misdirected pleasures. . . . It condemns the prostitution of art and of literature . . . It can tolerate no compromise with the theories, the standards, the habits, and the excesses of a decadent age."[16]**

And just as it exerts influence on the life of the individual, so does the principle of moderation have implications for the collective life of humanity. Bahá'u'lláh declares:

**"The civilization, so often vaunted by the learned exponents of arts and sciences, will, if allowed to overleap the bounds of moderation, bring great evil upon men. Thus warneth you He Who is the All-Knowing. If carried to excess, civilization will prove as prolific a source of evil as it had been of goodness when kept within the restraints of moderation. Meditate on this, O people, and be not of them that wander distraught in the wilderness of error. The day is approaching when its flame will devour the cities, when the Tongue of Grandeur will proclaim: 'The Kingdom is God's, the Almighty, the All-Praised!'"[17]**

The following words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá provide us with an indication of the degree to which the principle of moderation must permeate the structure of society:

**"For all the wealth, power, commerce, and industry are concentrated in the hands of a few individuals, while all others toil under the burden of endless hardships and difficulties, are bereft of advantages and benefits, and remain deprived of comfort and peace. One must therefore enact such laws and regulations as will moderate the excessive fortunes of the few and meet the basic needs of the myriad millions of the poor, that a degree of moderation may be achieved.**

**"However, absolute equality is just as untenable, for complete equality in wealth, power, commerce, agriculture, and industry would result in chaos and disorder, disrupt livelihoods, provoke universal discontent, and undermine the orderly conduct of the affairs of the community. For unjustified equality is also fraught with peril. It is preferable, then, that some measure of moderation be achieved, and by moderation is meant the enactment of such laws and regulations as would prevent the unwarranted concentration of wealth in the hands of the few and satisfy the essential needs of the many."**[18]

As is clear from the above quotations, the principle of moderation has profound implications for our individual and collective lives at the level of thought, utterance, and action. Since our particular concern here is its significance for humanity's passage to maturity, you may find an exercise helpful: The kind of civilization the "flame" of which has already begun to "devour the cities" throughout the planet cultivates the habit of taking every good thing to an extreme and distorting it. Describe in a sentence or two how the very meaning of each of the concepts below is being distorted.

a. Freedom: _____

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b. Material comfort: _____

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c. Material progress: _____

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d. Consumption: _____

e. The right of expression: _____

f. Pursuit of happiness: _____

g. Individuality: _____

Now go back and add to what you have written above a few sentences that describe the understanding you have gained about each concept as you have systematically advanced through the courses of the main sequence and carried out the acts of service to which they give rise.

## SECTION 7

There is a pitfall that we must avoid as we put into practice the principle of moderation: when moderation is held in opposition to excellence, it becomes an excuse for mediocrity. The "middle way" should not be understood as the "half way". The golden mean implies the proper way of doing things. Particularly, it is important not to apply erroneously the concept of moderation to the development of spiritual qualities. Here, we must strive for excellence and cannot be content with mediocrity. An example may clarify this point.

It is not uncommon to hear that the behavioral problems of "spoiled children" are the consequence of the excessive love their parents have for them. But what does "excessive love" mean in this case? Love is an attribute of God, which is reflected in our hearts. The more purified the heart, the more love it is able to reflect. And the love of God is infinite. How can one's love for one's children, or equally for friends and family, for humanity, for the Cause, be excessive? Could it not be that "too much love" refers to an expression of love that has lost its purity and become mingled with passions, say, in this case, possessiveness or the need to be wanted? And, could not the exercise of love, even when pure, bring unwanted consequences if other spiritual qualities such as wisdom and justice were to be neglected? What is at stake, then, seems to be the degree to which the nature of love as a spiritual quality is correctly understood and the extent to which its expression is free from the promptings of lower passions and desires, thus leaving room for the manifestation of other spiritual qualities.

With this example in mind, identify in your group qualities that may be lacking and undesirable passions that may be present in each of the following situations:

a. When the exercise of justice degenerates into cruelty: _____

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b. When the exercise of love leads to possessiveness: _____

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c. When the practice of generosity gives rise to extravagance: _____

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d. When the desire to show courage is expressed in recklessness: _____

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With the above clarification in mind, consider the activities we carry out in the field of service. Surely, exercising moderation does not imply approaching our efforts half-heartedly. Discuss how advancing through the institute courses assists individuals in gaining an understanding of appropriate manifestations of qualities such as justice, love, generosity, and courage on the path of service.

## SECTION 8

To hold concepts, only partially and simplistically understood, in opposition to each other is the second of the tendencies that we will consider in some detail here. As indicated in the passage below written by the Universal House of Justice, which you will recall from your study of the third unit of Book 8, this tendency can even appear in the life of the Bahá'í community, and effort must be exerted to overcome it:

> **"Closely related to the habit of reducing an entire theme into one or two appealing phrases is the tendency to perceive dichotomies, where, in fact, there are none. It is essential that ideas forming part of a cohesive whole not be held in opposition to one another. In a letter written on his behalf, Shoghi Effendi warned: 'We must take the teachings as a great, balanced whole, not seek out and oppose to each other two strong statements that have different meanings; somewhere in between, there are links uniting the two.' How encouraged we have been to note that many of the misunderstandings of the past have fallen away as appreciation for the provisions of the Plan has grown. Expansion and consolidation, individual action and collective campaigns, refinement of the inner character and consecration to selfless service—the harmonious relationship between these facets of Bahá'í life is now readily acknowledged. It brings us equal pleasure to know that the friends are on their guard, lest new false dichotomies be allowed to pervade their thinking. They are well aware that the diverse elements of a program of growth are complementary. The tendency to see activities, and the agencies that support them, in competition with one another, a tendency so common in society at large, is being avoided by the community."[19]**

1. Consider the following pairs of concepts. For each pair, how does a partial and simplistic understanding of the concepts create in our minds a dichotomy between them and diminish our ability to see their interdependence and complementarity?

   a. Expansion and consolidation: _____

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b. Individual action and collective campaigns: _____

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c. Refinement of the inner character and consecration to selfless service: _____

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What are some other dichotomies we could inadvertently create between various facets of our endeavors on the path of service?

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2. Now take a moment and consider how an understanding of the entire framework for action described in the messages of the Universal House of Justice and the "totality of the vision conveyed" in those messages—an understanding that grows through study, action, reflection on action, and consultation—enables us to overcome the above dichotomies. How does this growing understanding help us to remain on our guard, lest dichotomous thinking, so pervasive in society, enter the life of the community and create new tensions among its various facets?

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## SECTION 9

In exploring how a mature humanity will overcome the tendency mentioned in the above quotation, we should acknowledge that opposites do exist. Thus, deception and honesty, tyranny

and justice, cruelty and kindness can, for instance, be identified in relationships among human beings. What causes confusion and endless debate is the habit of creating "false dichotomies", seeing things as opposites when they are not. The widespread belief in a fundamental duality between the heart and the mind—feelings and reason standing in opposition to each other—is a good example for you to consider. The kinds of questions you may wish to ask as you try to analyze this belief are: What are the simplistic conceptions of the heart and the mind that perpetuate this false dichotomy? What kinds of attitudes do such simplistic conceptions engender about human emotions and human reason? How are people classified according to this false dichotomy? Are the praiseworthy qualities that are customarily attached to the human heart in conflict with those associated with the human mind? And do not all such qualities contribute to understanding the mysteries of God's Revelation and creation? Write some of your thoughts in relation to these and similar questions in the space below.

That the heart and the mind are not at war with each other, that there is no contradiction between the finest human emotions and the strongest discipline of a well-trained mind, is of course clear. The following passages shed light on this theme. You may wish to memorize them and look for other similar passages in the Writings.

> **"Say, implore God to open to your hearts the portals of true understanding that ye may be apprised of that of which no one is apprised. Verily, He is the Giver, the Forgiving, the Compassionate."[20]**

> **"O young trees and plants, matchless and tender, that grow in the meadows of guidance! O ye newcomers to the Fraternity of Truth! Although now ye be learners, the hope is that through showerings from the clouds of grace, ye will become teachers; that ye will flourish even as flowers and fragrant herbs in the garden of that knowledge which is both of the mind and of the heart; that each one of you will grow as a tree rich in yield, fair, fresh, and strong, heavy with sweet fruit."[21]**

**"Strive ye, therefore, with the help of God, with illumined minds and hearts and a strength born of heaven, to become a bestowal from God to man and to call into being, for all humankind, comfort and peace."[22]**

## SECTION 10

That obedience and freedom stand in opposition to each other is another duality which reflects the tendency we are considering here. We know that obedience to the laws of God leads to true freedom. Yet today, for an increasing number of people, "to obey" is becoming equivalent to "losing freedom", and this way of thinking is giving rise to such rejection of authority that the very foundations of civilization are being threatened. That on many occasions there can be tension between obedience and the desire for freedom need not, of course, be questioned. Obedience to the dictates of the lower nature definitely leads to loss of freedom, as does obedience to tyranny sustained by clever machinations to keep a people in ignorance. But obedience and freedom are not the opposite of one another. Otherwise, we may ask ourselves, how would Bahá'u'lláh have defined true liberty as obedience to His commandments?

The cause of confusion here lies, to a great extent, in an inadequate understanding of both obedience and freedom. The idea of obedience has become mingled with such notions as imposition, blind imitation, absence of sound reasoning, and lack of autonomy. The reasoned obedience of a mature person capable of exercising free will is not considered. Nor is it recognized that free will finds proper direction only when it aligns itself with the Will of God. There is an underlying premise that, to be real, freedom should be unbounded. And it is assumed, wrongly in fact, that one's likes and dislikes are purely one's own and not products of a particular life experience that has been strongly influenced by social forces. To overcome the false dichotomy thus created requires an accurate understanding of the meaning of words and concepts and the rigorous scrutiny of hidden assumptions. The Universal House of Justice writes:

**"Freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom of action are among the freedoms which have received the ardent attention of social thinkers across the centuries. The resulting outflow of such profound thought has exerted a tremendous liberating influence in the shaping of modern society. Generations of the oppressed have fought and died in the name of freedom. Certainly the want of freedom from oppression has been a dominant factor in the turmoil of the times: witness the plethora of movements which have resulted in the rapid emergence of new nations in the latter part of the twentieth century. A true reading of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh leaves no doubt as to the high importance of these freedoms to constructive social processes. Consider, for instance, Bahá'u'lláh's proclamation to the kings and rulers. Can it not be deduced from this alone that attainment of freedom is a significant purpose of His Revelation? His denunciations of tyranny and His urgent appeals on behalf of the oppressed provide unmistakable proof. But does not the freedom foreshadowed by His Revelation imply nobler, ampler manifestations of human achievement? Does it not indicate an organic relationship between the internal and external realities of man such as has not yet been attained?**

**"In his summary of significant Bahá'í teachings, Shoghi Effendi wrote that Bahá'u'lláh 'inculcates the principle of "moderation in all things"; declares that**

**whatsoever, be it "liberty, civilization and the like", "passeth beyond the limits of moderation" must "exercise a pernicious influence upon men"; observes that western civilization has gravely perturbed and alarmed the peoples of the world; and predicts that the day is approaching when the "flame" of a civilization "carried to excess" "will devour the cities".'**

**"Expounding the theme of liberty, Bahá'u'lláh asserted that 'the embodiment of liberty and its symbol is the animal'; that 'liberty causeth man to overstep the bounds of propriety, and to infringe on the dignity of his station'; that 'true liberty consisteth in man's submission unto My commandments'. 'We approve of liberty in certain circumstances,' He declared, 'and refuse to sanction it in others.' But He gave the assurance that, 'Were men to observe that which We have sent down unto them from the Heaven of Revelation, they would, of a certainty, attain unto perfect liberty.' And again, He said, 'Mankind in its entirety must firmly adhere to whatsoever hath been revealed and vouchsafed unto it. Then and only then will it attain unto true liberty.'**

**"Bahá'u'lláh's assertions clearly call for an examination of current assumptions. Should liberty be as free as is supposed in contemporary Western thought? Where does freedom limit our possibilities for progress, and where do limits free us to thrive? What are the limits to the expansion of freedom? For so fluid and elastic are its qualities of application and expression that the concept of freedom in any given situation is likely to assume a different latitude from one mind to another; these qualities are, alas, susceptible to the employment alike of good and evil. Is it any wonder, then, that Bahá'u'lláh exhorts us to submission to the will of God?"[23]**

The above words of the Universal House of Justice introduce us to the kind of reasoning that is needed if humanity is to transcend, as it moves towards its maturity, the apparent dichotomy between obedience and freedom. We are required to acknowledge, among other things, that false dichotomies often have profound historical roots; in this case, the long struggle of the vast majority of humanity against oppression cannot be ignored in understanding current attitudes and assumptions. Yet it is imperative that, during the age of transition, today's prevalent notion of freedom give way to a far more mature conception.

The writings of the Faith, of course, refute false notions of freedom. In one passage, having described the nature of divine freedom and then the Western notion of political freedom, 'Abdu'l-Bahá goes on to explain:

**"The third freedom is that which is born of obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Almighty. This is the freedom of the human world, where man severs his affections from all things. When he does so, he becomes immune to all hardship and sorrow. Wealth or material power will not deflect him from moderation and fairness, neither will poverty or need inhibit him from showing forth happiness and tranquility. The more the conscience of man develops, the more will his heart be free and his soul attain unto happiness. In the religion of God, there is freedom of thought because God, alone, controls the human conscience, but this freedom should not go beyond courtesy. In the religion of God, there is no freedom of action outside the law of God. Man may not transgress this law, even though no harm is inflicted on one's neighbor. This is because the purpose of Divine law is the education of all—others as well as oneself—and, in the sight of God, the harm**

**done to one individual or to his neighbor is the same and is reprehensible in both cases. Hearts must possess the fear of God. Man should endeavor to avoid that which is abhorrent unto God."[24]**

1. Overcoming the false dichotomy between freedom and obedience presents humanity with enormous challenges. There are so many concepts erroneously associated with only one and not with the other. Take a quick look, for example, at some words and phrases generally associated with "freedom", on the one hand, and "obedience" on the other:

| **Freedom** | **Obedience** |
|---|---|
| dignity | servitude |
| happiness | humility |
| lack of fear | submissiveness |
| courage | contentment |
| self-determination | discipline |

With the other members of your group, try to identify assumptions held by so much of contemporary society that form the basis for the associations presented above. How do these assumptions differ from the insights found in the writings of the Faith?

2. Today, the talk of freedom is on everyone's tongue, but the result is more and more enslavement. Mention some of the chains from which humanity will free itself as it increasingly understands the meaning of true freedom during its journey towards maturity. An example is provided below.

the chains of self and ego

## SECTION 11

Let us pause here and consider what we have done so far. We began this unit by looking at the nature of the transition from childhood to maturity as it applies to the individual. We then

tried to identify tendencies in society that, characteristic of humanity's collective childhood, will gradually give way to attitudes and habits of thought and action befitting its maturity. So, while present-day society tends to encourage the pursuit of self-interest and promote a false notion of freedom, we can imagine that a mature humanity will seek to organize its affairs according to the dictates of its inherent nobility and place value on altruism and submission to the Will of God. While social structures and processes today enable vested interests to manipulate the great masses, a humanity that has recognized its oneness and learned to exercise its intellectual and spiritual powers for the common good will not allow itself to be so distracted by ephemeral pursuits or become the victim of propaganda. The two tendencies we examined in some detail—to think and act in extremes and to hold complementary ideas in opposition to one another—will yield to habits of thought and action governed by the principle of moderation and the ability to work with full and complex ideas. Such habits, we can assume, will take root not only at the level of the individual but also at the level of society, in its institutions and decision-making processes.

Before we end this part of our exploration, we should acknowledge that, in trying to understand the nature of humanity's transition to maturity, we have reflected on only a few changes in culture that we might reasonably expect to occur. Whatever the insights we have gained in doing so, we should remember how utterly impossible it is for us to envision with any degree of clarity the glorious future that awaits humankind. Shoghi Effendi, whose words in many instances offer us glimpses of such a far distant future, himself speaks to this point:

> **"Who can doubt that such a consummation—the coming of age of the human race—must signalize, in its turn, the inauguration of a world civilization such as no mortal eye hath ever beheld or human mind conceived? Who is it that can imagine the lofty standard which such a civilization, as it unfolds itself, is destined to attain? Who can measure the heights to which human intelligence, liberated from its shackles, will soar? Who can visualize the realms which the human spirit, vitalized by the outpouring light of Bahá'u'lláh, shining in the plenitude of its glory, will discover?"[25]**

## SECTION 12

Our reflections on some of the attributes of a mature humanity, and the culture to which they will give rise, will aid us considerably as we examine, in the remainder of this unit, a number of ideas related to the mission of the Faith. We already know that the evolution of human society would have been impossible without the light of successive Divine Revelations. The Manifestations of God have guided humanity from one stage of its development to the next. The Guardian states in this connection:

> **"Just as the organic evolution of mankind has been slow and gradual, and involved successively the unification of the family, the tribe, the city-state, and the nation, so has the light vouchsafed by the Revelation of God, at various stages in the evolution of religion, and reflected in the successive Dispensations of the past, been slow and progressive. Indeed the measure of Divine Revelation, in every age, has been adapted to, and commensurate with, the degree of social progress achieved in that age by a constantly evolving humanity."[26]**

The Guardian further explains that the appearance of each Manifestation of God has propelled humanity closer to its collective maturity, when "the tree of humanity will have yielded its destined fruit". Today, in response to Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, humanity is moving swiftly towards the highest stage in its collective development. The hallmark of this stage will be the realization of the oneness of humanity and the unification of the entire human race. This extraordinary goal is but an indication of the power of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation:

> **"The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, whose supreme mission is none other but the achievement of this organic and spiritual unity of the whole body of nations, should, if we be faithful to its implications, be regarded as signalizing through its advent the *coming of age of the entire human race*. It should be viewed not merely as yet another spiritual revival in the ever-changing fortunes of mankind, not only as a further stage in a chain of progressive Revelations, nor even as the culmination of one of a series of recurrent prophetic cycles, but rather as marking the last and highest stage in the stupendous evolution of man's collective life on this planet."**[27]

Underscoring the uniqueness of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, the Guardian states:

> **"For Bahá'u'lláh, we should readily recognize, has not only imbued mankind with a new and regenerating Spirit. He has not merely enunciated certain universal principles, or propounded a particular philosophy, however potent, sound and universal these may be. In addition to these He, as well as 'Abdu'l-Bahá after Him, has, unlike the Dispensations of the past, clearly and specifically laid down a set of Laws, established definite institutions, and provided for the essentials of a Divine Economy. These are destined to be a pattern for future society, a supreme instrument for the establishment of the Most Great Peace, and the one agency for the unification of the world, and the proclamation of the reign of righteousness and justice upon the earth."**[28]

To think through the ideas contained in these passages, fill in the blanks in the sentences below.

a. In the first passage, the Guardian tells us that, just as the _____ of mankind has been _____ and _____, and involved successively the _____ of the _____, the _____, the _____, and the _____, so has the _____ vouchsafed by the _____, at various stages in the _____ of _____, and reflected in the successive _____ of the past, been _____ and _____.

b. In this connection, he indicates that the _____ of _____, in every age, has been _____, and _____, the degree of _____ achieved in that age by a _____ _____.

c. We should readily recognize, the Guardian tells us, that Bahá'u'lláh has not only _____ mankind with a _____ and _____ Spirit; He has not merely _____ certain _____ , or _____ a particular _____ , however _____ , _____ and _____ these may be.

d. Shoghi Effendi goes on to explain that Bahá'u'lláh, as well as 'Abdu'l-Bahá after Him, has, unlike the _____ , clearly and specifically laid down a _____ , established _____ , and provided for the _____ , which are destined to be a pattern for _____ , a supreme instrument for the _____ , and the one agency for _____ , and the _____ _____ .

## SECTION 13

The words of the Guardian quoted in the previous section are among the many extolling the special nature of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. A superficial observer may find a contradiction between our belief in the uniqueness of this Revelation and our acceptance of the divine origin of all major religions. Belief in the doctrine of progressive revelation is, of course, a source of countless blessings in our lives as Bahá'ís. It enables us to remain free of religious animosity and to put into practice Bahá'u'lláh's commandment: "Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship." It encourages, for example, the Bahá'í community to participate in, and indeed promote, interfaith dialogue without the slightest feeling of superiority—not to show mere religious tolerance but to express its firm conviction that, underneath the apparent differences separating the followers of existing faiths, religion is in its essence one. Yet the Bahá'í Faith is not an interfaith movement. Overcoming religious conflict, although highly important, is only one of the milestones humanity must reach during its passage from childhood to maturity.

Your group may wish to discuss this point in some detail, for, in clarifying that the above-stated contradiction does not exist, we protect ourselves from the kind of mindset which tends to diminish the significance of some of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. The fear of rejection that often accompanies such a mindset becomes an obstacle to effective teaching. One ends up presenting the Faith not in its true potency with consummate wisdom, according to the capacity of the listener, but describing it as a progressive movement with little more to offer than a few, by now accepted, principles and ideals. And the stupendous civilization envisioned in His Writings is depicted as something akin to that which is found in materially advanced parts of the world today, albeit global in scope and in some sense spiritualized.

On the next page are three groups of ideas. Drawing on a few ideas from each group, try to write a couple of paragraphs that express your understanding of how it is possible to be fully convinced of the greatness of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and at the same time avoid the kind of thought and language that would give the impression of triumphalism, superiority, and aloofness.

**Group 1:**

- To understand the direction in which human history is unfolding
- To appreciate Bahá'u'lláh's vision for humanity
- To fathom the magnitude of the transformation in the individual and in society called for by Bahá'u'lláh
- To see the long span of time needed to reach His vision
- To recognize the magnitude of the tasks ahead
- To seek to understand and to live and serve according to the teachings

**Group 2:**

- To maintain a posture of learning
- To create a common vocabulary that describes what Bahá'ís do
- To elicit the participation of more and more people in the work of community building
- To welcome the contributions of those from all walks of life
- To become increasingly involved in the life of society, while remaining aware of the inadequacies of current modes of thinking and doing
- To possess a willingness both to offer to others lessons learned from the experience of the community and to draw upon insights gained through collaboration with them

**Group 3:**

- To maintain zeal without becoming "triumphal"
- To see the difference between "hype" and enthusiasm
- To derive joy from unified, systematic action
- To recognize the difference between celebration and boastfulness
- To understand that there is a difference between upholding high ideals and considering oneself to be their embodiment
- To avoid the pitfall of collective self-praise
- To put away the "garment of vainglory"

## SECTION 14

As we come to appreciate the special nature of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation and the magnitude of the forces it has released in the world, we begin to reflect ever more deeply on the contribution we must make as individuals and as a community in the unfoldment of this, the greatest drama in the world's spiritual history. The quotations below, though but a small sampling, provide an indication of what is expected of us at this pivotal historical moment.

> **"This is a matchless Day. Matchless must, likewise, be the tongue that celebrateth the praise of the Desire of all nations, and matchless the deed that aspireth to be acceptable in His sight. The whole human race hath longed for this Day, that perchance it may fulfill that which well beseemeth its station, and is worthy of its destiny. Blessed is the man whom the affairs of the world have failed to deter from recognizing Him Who is the Lord of all things."[29]**

> **"O peoples of the world! Forsake all evil, hold fast that which is good. Strive to be shining examples unto all mankind, and true reminders of the virtues of God amidst men. He that riseth to serve My Cause should manifest My wisdom, and bend every effort to banish ignorance from the earth. Be united in counsel, be one in thought. Let each morn be better than its eve and each morrow richer than its yesterday. Man's merit lieth in service and virtue and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches. Take heed that your words be purged from idle fancies and worldly desires and your deeds be cleansed from craftiness and suspicion. Dissipate not the wealth of your precious lives in the pursuit of evil and corrupt affection, nor let your endeavors be spent in promoting your personal interest. Be generous in your days of plenty, and be patient in the hour of loss. Adversity is followed by success and rejoicings follow woe. Guard against idleness and sloth, and cling unto that which profiteth mankind, whether young or old, whether high or low. Beware lest ye sow tares of dissension among men or plant thorns of doubt in pure and radiant hearts."[30]**

**"Holy words and pure and goodly deeds ascend unto the heaven of celestial glory. Strive that your deeds may be cleansed from the dust of self and hypocrisy and find favor at the court of glory; for ere long the assayers of mankind shall, in the holy presence of the Adored One, accept naught but absolute virtue and deeds of stainless purity. This is the daystar of wisdom and of divine mystery that hath shone above the horizon of the divine will. Blessed are they that turn thereunto."[31]**

**"It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which hath been written into reality and action. . . . That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race. The Great Being saith: Blessed and happy is he that ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth. In another passage He hath proclaimed: It is not for him to pride himself who loveth his own country, but rather for him who loveth the whole world. The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens."[32]**

**". . . the divine reality is unlimited and immeasurable and can never stop or deteriorate, therefore the holy souls who are confirmed with this divine power are likewise endowed with eternal motion. Their progress becomes unlimited. Day unto day their lives are strengthened, the circle of their comprehension becomes wider, the sphere of their intellects becomes more effectual and their capacities are increased.**

**"I desire for you that ideal power, so that you may come into the stream of uninterrupted motion and never cease progressing."[33]**

**"The beloved of the Lord must stand fixed as the mountains, firm as impregnable walls. Unmoved must they remain by even the direst adversities, ungrieved by the worst of disasters. Let them cling to the hem of Almighty God, and put their faith in the Beauty of the Most High; let them lean on the unfailing help that cometh from the Ancient Kingdom, and depend on the care and protection of the generous Lord. Let them at all times refresh and restore themselves with the dews of heavenly grace, and with the breaths of the Holy Spirit revive and renew themselves from moment to moment. Let them rise up to serve their Lord, and do all in their power to scatter His breathings of holiness far and wide. Let them be a mighty fortress to defend His Faith, an impregnable citadel for the hosts of the Ancient Beauty."[34]**

**"Wherefore must the friends of God, with utter sanctity, with one accord, rise up in the spirit, in unity with one another, to such a degree that they will become even as one being and one soul. On such a plane as this, physical bodies play no part, rather doth the spirit take over and rule; and when its power encompasseth all then is spiritual union achieved. Strive ye by day and night to cultivate your unity to the fullest degree."[35]**

**"Dearly beloved friends! It is not for us, at this crucial hour, to delve into the future, to speculate on the possibilities of the Plan and its orientation, to conjecture on its impact on the unfoldment of an embryonic World Order, or to dwell on the glories and triumphs which it may hold in store, or to seek to delineate the mysterious course which a God-given Mission, impelled by forces beyond our power to predict or appraise, may pursue. To try to obtain a clear view of the**

**shape of things to come would be premature, inasmuch as the glittering prizes to be won are directly dependent on the measure of success which the combined efforts that are now being exerted must yield. Ours is the duty to fix our gaze with undeviating attention on the duties and responsibilities confronting us at this present hour, to concentrate our resources, both material and spiritual, on the tasks that lie immediately ahead, to ensure that no time is wasted, that no opportunity is missed, that no obligation is evaded, that no task is half-heartedly performed, that no decision is procrastinated."**[36]

It is suggested that you draw upon the above quotations to write a paragraph or two about how we are to respond, in a manner that is worthy of this Cause, to the exigencies of the Day in which we live.

Before leaving this section, we should consider one final thought: When we read the above and similar passages found in the writings of the Faith, our hearts are uplifted and filled with many a joyful sentiment. We feel a sense of urgency, and our resolve to walk firmly on the path of service is strengthened. Yet, at times, certain contradictory feelings also creep into our hearts—a degree of impatience with our shortcomings and some doubt as to our ability to live up to such exalted standards. You may wish to discuss in your group the origins of such contrary sentiments and consider how they can be pushed away from our hearts and minds as soon as they appear, for Bahá'u'lláh's admonitions carry with them immeasurable joy and nothing should be allowed to diminish the sublimity of their impact.

## SECTION 15

Reflections on passages such as the ones quoted in the previous section invariably lead to increased commitment to the Cause, a concept which, itself, merits thought. It is clear, of course, that no movement can go forward if it does not enjoy the wholehearted commitment of its adherents. It is also true that commitment is not absent in most people's lives; so many are committed, say, to their businesses, to their families, to sports, or to their studies. Let us ask ourselves, however, what it means to be committed to the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh.

To begin, we should remind ourselves that the Faith does not demand from us a fanatical commitment. If steady advancement towards maturity is what is at stake, then, as we have discussed before, we must remain ever conscious of the principle of moderation. Yet, our earlier discussion also implies that moderation here cannot mean half-heartedness. In this context, you may wish to return to the points raised in Book 5 related to an integrated way of life, in which problems arising from fragmentation are successfully avoided. In such a life, total commitment to the Cause takes on its own particular meaning. We place our love for Bahá'u'lláh and His Cause at the center of our being and order everything around it. But still we must ask: What are some of the truths that compel us to commit ourselves to such a life? What are some of the attributes and requirements that strengthen this commitment? To help you in your reflections on this theme, here are a number of quotations from the Bahá'í writings. You are asked to read them and write a paragraph in response to the above questions in each of the spaces provided.

1. **". . . you are well aware of your mission to be a source of hope to those around you, to be channels of love and affection, to be symbols of forgiveness and patience, of serenity and strength to your compatriots, and above all, to be in the front ranks of that process by which the worldwide community has learned to build capacity for service, heighten unity, deepen understanding, and hone abilities so that purposeful action for the benefit of mankind may ensue. Through the spiritual and social transformation thus promoted, the Bahá'í world has come to realize that what is being cultivated is a process that enhances orientation to service and commitment to the application of the divine precepts—a process that holds far-reaching implications for the life of the individual and for the betterment of the world."[37]**

2. **"There is undoubtedly no higher call than that of bringing the Message to a world tormented and torn on every side by the forces of destructive materialism. It is for us to realize the full measure of responsibility that has been laid upon our shoulders in this matter, and having attained full consciousness of our responsibility to unitedly arise to contribute all that we can towards its discharge."[38]**

**"Another of the sacred responsibilities of the believers is their spiritual commitment to serve God's Sacred Threshold at all times and under all conditions so that they may dedicate the few, fleeting days of their lives—particularly in this age of transition—to the Cause of God, unmindful of the vicissitudes of fortune, trusting in Providence, and relieved of worries and anxieties."[39]**

3. **"The plight of mankind, the condition and circumstances under which we live and labor are truly disheartening, and the darkness of prejudice and ill-will enough to chill the stoutest heart. Disillusion and dismay are invading the hearts of peoples and nations, and the hope and vision of a united and regenerated humanity is growing dimmer and dimmer every day. Time-honored institutions, cherished ideals, and sacred traditions are suffering in these days of bewildering change, from the effects of the gravest onslaught, and the precious fruit of centuries of patient and earnest labor is faced with peril. Passions, supposed to have been curbed and subdued, are now burning fiercer than ever before, and the voice of peace and goodwill seems drowned amid unceasing convulsions and turmoil. What, let us ask ourselves, should be our attitude as we stand under the all-seeing eye of our vigilant Master, gazing at a sad spectacle so utterly remote from the spirit which He breathed into the world? Are we to follow in the wake of the wayward and the despairing? Are we to allow our vision of so unique, so enduring, so precious a Cause to be clouded by the stain and dust of worldly happenings, which, no matter how glittering and far-reaching in their immediate effects, are but the fleeting shadows of an imperfect world? Are we to be carried away by the flood of hollow and conflicting ideas, or are we to stand, unsubdued and unblemished, upon the everlasting rock of God's Divine Instructions? Shall we not equip ourselves with a clear and full understanding of their purpose and implications for the age we live in, and with an unconquerable resolve arise to utilize them, intelligently and with scrupulous fidelity, for the enlightenment and the promotion of the good of all mankind?"[40]**

4. **"I appeal to you, therefore, friends and fellow-disciples of Bahá'u'lláh, for a more abundant measure of self-sacrifice, for a higher standard of concerted effort, for a still more compelling evidence of the reality of the faith that glows within you."[41]**

**"So exalted a mission, so strenuous a task, so weighty a responsibility call for . . . an unprecedented demonstration, on the part of young and old, of both men and women, whether administrators or teachers, veterans or neophytes, of solidarity, determination, zeal and constancy, a still greater display of self-sacrifice, a wider dispersion of forces, a more energetic discharge of duty, a clearer vision, a firmer grasp, of the requirements of the present hour, and a more complete dedication to the purposes of the present-day enterprise."[42]**

5. **"It behooveth whosoever willeth to journey for the sake of God, and whose intention is to proclaim His Word and quicken the dead, to bathe himself with the waters of detachment, and to adorn his temple with the ornaments of resignation and submission. Let trust in God be his shield, and reliance on God his provision, and the fear of God his raiment. Let patience be his helper, and praiseworthy conduct his succorer, and goodly deeds his army. Then will the concourse on high sustain him. Then will the denizens of the Kingdom of Names march forth with him, and the banners of Divine guidance and inspiration be unfurled on his right hand and before him."[43]**

**"Ultimately, the choice fruits of one's striving are manifested in selfless service to the Cause, surrendering all personal interests and desires for the things that pertain unto God, subordinating one's will to the common good and ever mindful of the pitfall of attachment to one's own service."[44]**

**"Detachment is needed. When effort is expended wholly for the sake of God then all that occurs belongs to Him and every victory won in His Name is an occasion to celebrate His praise."[45]**

6. **"Humanity, torn with dissension and burning with hate, is crying at this hour for a fuller measure of that love which is born of God, that love which in the last resort will prove the one solvent of its incalculable difficulties and problems. Is it not incumbent upon us, whose hearts are aglow with love for Him, to make still greater effort, to manifest that love in all its purity and power in our dealings with our fellow men? May our love of our beloved Master, so ardent, so disinterested in all its aspects, find its true expression in love for our fellow-brethren and sisters in the Faith as well as for all mankind. I assure you, dear friends, that progress in such matters as these is limitless and infinite, and that upon the extent of our achievements along this line will ultimately depend the success of our mission in life."[46]**

**"The Faith of Bahá'u'lláh has assimilated, by virtue of its creative, its regulative and ennobling energies, the varied races, nationalities, creeds and classes that have sought its shadow, and have pledged unswerving fealty to its cause. It has changed the hearts of its adherents, burned away their prejudices, stilled their passions, exalted their conceptions, ennobled their motives, coordinated their efforts, and transformed their outlook. While preserving their patriotism and safeguarding their lesser loyalties, it has made them lovers of mankind, and the determined upholders of its best and truest interests. While maintaining intact their belief in the Divine origin of their respective religions, it has enabled them to visualize the underlying purpose of these religions, to discover their merits, to recognize their sequence, their interdependence, their wholeness and unity, and to acknowledge the bond that vitally links them to itself. This universal, this transcending love which the followers of the Bahá'í Faith feel for their fellow men, of whatever race, creed, class or nation, is neither mysterious nor can it be said to have been artificially stimulated. It is both spontaneous and genuine. They whose hearts are warmed by the energizing influence of God's creative love cherish His creatures for His sake, and recognize in every human face a sign of His reflected glory."[47]**

**"Notwithstanding the orders of complexity that must eventually be accommodated as a community grows in size, all activity begins with this simple strand of love. It is the vital thread from which is woven a pattern of patient and concentrated effort, cycle after cycle, to introduce children, youth, and adults to spiritual ideas; to foster a feeling for worship through gatherings for prayer and devotion; to stimulate conversations that illuminate understanding; to start ever-growing numbers on a lifetime of study of the Creative Word and its translation into deeds; to develop, along with others, capacity for service; and to accompany one another in the exercise of what has been learned. Beloved friends, loved ones of the Abhá Beauty: We pray for you in earnest on every occasion we present ourselves at His Holy Threshold, that your love for Him may give you the strength to consecrate your lives to His Cause."[48]**

## SECTION 16

As we participate in the life of the Bahá'í community and witness firsthand the transforming potency of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, our commitment to the Cause of God continues to grow. Given the magnitude of the changes that must occur during this age of transition, the contributions we each make to the progress of the Faith will always appear to be small. But small does not mean insignificant; streams moving in the same direction join to make a mighty river. As we walk the path of service that the global Plans of the Faith trace for us—first in tens, then thousands, then millions—we learn to perceive the changes occurring around us in at least three contexts. At the level of the individual, we see the effects of the consistent pursuit of a twofold moral purpose to attend to one's personal spiritual growth and to contribute meaningfully to the transformation of society. At the level of community, we catch glimpses of what it will mean to be immersed in a culture that is shaped by the application of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. At the level of society, we are able to recognize and understand the operation of constructive and destructive forces.

As you know, the pursuit of a twofold moral purpose has been the focus, whether directly or not, of many courses in this sequence. The process of community building has also been, and will continue to be, addressed. Our explorations in this unit lend themselves to a brief examination of the forces that operate in society and the way we are to deal with them. But, for such an examination to be fruitful, we first need to articulate a narrative of historical time that corresponds to humanity's passage to maturity. To this task we will now turn our attention.

The Guardian possessed a keen sense of historical time, and in his messages he often made reference to the various stages through which the Bahá'í Era will unfold, describing events and achievements within that context. In the next few sections we will familiarize ourselves with some of the concepts and vocabulary he used.

## SECTION 17

The Declaration of the Báb in 1844 marks the commencement of the Bahá'í Cycle, the "Cycle of Fulfillment". It was preceded by the Adamic Cycle, which witnessed "a series of progressive dispensations associated with Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus, Muḥammad and other Prophets". A letter written by Shoghi Effendi explains:

> **"The Faith of Bahá'u'lláh should indeed be regarded, if we wish to be faithful to the tremendous implications of its message, as the culmination of a cycle, the final stage in a series of successive, of preliminary and progressive revelations. These, beginning with Adam and ending with the Báb, have paved the way and anticipated with an ever-increasing emphasis the advent of that Day of Days in which He Who is the Promise of All Ages should be made manifest."**[49]

Thus, the Guardian tells us, posterity will recognize in the life of the Báb "the confluence of two universal prophetic cycles, the Adamic Cycle stretching back as far as the first dawnings of the world's recorded religious history and the Bahá'í Cycle destined to propel itself across the unborn reaches of time for a period of no less than five thousand centuries." Within these cycles, the advent of a new Manifestation of God marks the beginning of a new dispensation.

The Bahá'í Era, the first era of the Bahá'í Cycle, includes both the Dispensation of the Báb and the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh, the latter of which,

> **"as the Author of the Faith has Himself categorically asserted, must extend over a period of no less than one thousand years, and which will constitute the first stage in a series of Dispensations, to be established by future Manifestations, all deriving their inspiration from the Author of the Bahá'í Revelation, and destined to last, in their aggregate, no less than five thousand centuries."[50]**

In the notes that accompany the authorized English translation of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, reference is made to "the one thousand years or more that must elapse before the appearance of the next Manifestation of God." During this period, the provisions of "the Mother Book of His Dispensation" will "remain inviolate" and its "system will embrace the entire planet".

Now, as part of your review and reflection, you may wish to answer the following questions:

a. The Bahá'í Cycle follows the Adamic Cycle. When did the Bahá'í Cycle begin? How long is it destined to last? Can you write one or two sentences that describe its significance?

_____

_____

_____

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_____

b. The Bahá'í Era is made up of the Dispensation of the Báb and the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh. What event marked the beginning of the Bahá'í Era? What year is it now according to the Bahá'í Era? What is the current century according to the Bahá'í Era?

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## SECTION 18

In the foreword to *God Passes By*, his penetrating analysis of the first century of the Bahá'í Era, the Guardian writes:

**"In its broadest outline the first century of the Bahá'í Era may be said to comprise the Heroic, the Primitive, the Apostolic Age of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, and also the initial stages of the Formative, the Transitional, the Iron Age which is to witness the crystallization and shaping of the creative energies released by His Revelation. The first eighty years of this century may roughly be said to have covered the entire period of the first age, while the last two decades may be regarded as having witnessed the beginnings of the second. The former commences with the Declaration of the Báb, includes the mission of Bahá'u'lláh, and terminates with the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The latter is ushered in by His Will and Testament, which defines its character and establishes its foundation."**[51]

We see in other passages written by the Guardian that the Bahá'í Era is, in fact, divided into three ages. The first, as noted above, is the Apostolic or Heroic Age, associated with the Central Figures of the Faith. The second is the Formative or Transitional Age, the "hallmark" of which will be the rise and establishment of the Administrative Order according to the precepts laid down in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Will and Testament. The final is the Golden Age, which will represent the "consummation of this glorious Dispensation". Every age is further divided into a number of time periods, or epochs. Below is the Guardian's description of the Heroic Age, which is made up of three periods.

**"The first period (1844–1853), centers around the gentle, the youthful and irresistible person of the Báb, matchless in His meekness, imperturbable in His serenity, magnetic in His utterance, unrivaled in the dramatic episodes of His swift and tragic ministry. It begins with the Declaration of His Mission, culminates in His martyrdom, and ends in a veritable orgy of religious massacre revolting in its hideousness. It is characterized by nine years of fierce and relentless contest, whose theater was the whole of Persia, in which above ten thousand heroes laid down their lives, in which two sovereigns of the Qájár dynasty and their wicked ministers participated, and which was supported by the entire Shí'ah ecclesiastical hierarchy, by the military resources of the state, and by the implacable hostility of the masses. The second period (1853–1892) derives its inspiration from the august figure of Bahá'u'lláh, preeminent in holiness, awesome in the majesty of His strength and power, unapproachable in the transcendent brightness of His glory. It opens with the first stirrings, in the soul of Bahá'u'lláh while in the Síyáh-Chál of Ṭihrán, of the Revelation anticipated by the Báb, attains its plenitude in the proclamation of that Revelation to the kings and ecclesiastical leaders of the earth, and terminates in the ascension of its Author in the vicinity of the prison-town of 'Akká. It extends over thirty-nine years of continuous, of unprecedented and overpowering Revelation, is marked by the propagation of the Faith to the neighboring territories of Turkey, of Russia, of 'Iráq, of Syria, of Egypt and of India, and is distinguished by a corresponding aggravation of hostility, represented by the united attacks launched by the Sháh of Persia and the Sulṭán of Turkey, the two admittedly most powerful potentates of the East, as well as by the opposition of the twin sacerdotal orders of Shí'ah and Sunní Islám. The third period (1892–1921) revolves around the vibrant personality of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, mysterious in His essence, unique in His station, astoundingly potent in both the charm and strength of His character. It commences with the announcement of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh, a document without parallel in the history of any earlier Dispensation, attains its climax in the emphatic assertion by the Center of that Covenant, in the City of the Covenant, of the unique character and far-reaching implications of that Document, and closes**

**with His passing and the interment of His remains on Mt. Carmel. It will go down in history as a period of almost thirty years' duration, in which tragedies and triumphs have been so intertwined as to eclipse at one time the Orb of the Covenant, and at another time to pour forth its light over the continent of Europe, and as far as Australasia, the Far East and the North American continent."**[52]

To consolidate your knowledge of the events associated with the Heroic Age, complete the sentences below on the basis of the above quotation.

a. The first period of the Heroic Age centers around _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

b. It begins with _____

c. It culminates in _____

d. It ends in _____

_____

e. It is characterized by _____

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f. The second period of the Heroic Age derives its inspiration from _____

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_____

g. It opens with _____

_____

_____

h. It attains its plentitude in _____

_____

i. It terminates in _____

_____

j. It extends over _____

_____

k. It is marked by _____

_____

_____

l. It is distinguished by _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

m. The third period of the Heroic Age revolves around _____

_____

_____

_____

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n. It commences with _____

_____

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o. It attains its climax in _____

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_____

_____

_____

p. It closes with _____

_____

q. It will go down in history as _____

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_____

Now, the Guardian tells us in another passage that the Heroic Age was "impregnated, from its inception to its termination, with the creative energies generated through the advent of two independent Manifestations and the establishment of a Covenant unique in the spiritual annals of mankind." In light of what you have read above and the knowledge you have gained from your study of Book 4 and of the first unit of Book 8, can you write a few sentences about the significance of the Heroic Age?

## SECTION 19

We live and serve in the Formative Age of the Faith, during which, the Guardian explains,

> **"the last and crowning stage in the erection of the framework of the Administrative Order of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh—the election of the Universal House of Justice—will have been completed, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, the Mother-Book of His Revelation, will have been codified and its laws promulgated, the Lesser Peace will have been established, the unity of mankind will have been achieved and its maturity attained, the Plan conceived by 'Abdu'l-Bahá will have been executed, the emancipation of the Faith from the fetters of religious orthodoxy will have been effected, and its independent religious status will have been universally recognized . . ."**[53]

The passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1921 is the event most often identified with the close of the Heroic Age and the beginning of the Formative Age. However, the transition from one period to another is not always sharply defined but can be seen, given the organic nature of the growth of the Faith, to occur over a period of time. Thus, the Guardian also asserts that the Apostolic Age of the Faith concluded "more particularly" with the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's "well-beloved and illustrious sister, the Most Exalted Leaf—the last survivor of a glorious and heroic age".

Like the Heroic Age, the Formative Age is divided into time periods, generally called "epochs". The epochs of the Formative Age are associated with the shaping, development and consolidation of our local, national, continental, and international institutions and with the functioning of the Bahá'í community at higher and higher levels of maturity. The Faith has already passed through five epochs and currently stands in the sixth epoch of its Formative Age. If we look in the writings of the Guardian and the Universal House of Justice, we can chart the progress of the Faith down the decades through references made to these epochs. Here is the trajectory we will see:

- Referring to the first century of the Bahá'í Era, which drew to a close in 1944, Shoghi Effendi indicated that its final "twenty-three years" coincided with "the first epoch" of the Formative Age of the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh. It witnessed "the birth and the primary stages in the erection of the framework of the Administrative Order", on the one hand, and "the launching of the initial phase of the world-encompassing Plan" in the Western Hemisphere, on the other. The Guardian placed the termination of this epoch during the opening years of the second century of the Bahá'í Era.

- The second epoch of the Formative Age opened in 1946. Shoghi Effendi explained that, in this epoch, the Faith utilized the "machinery of its institutions", which were "created patiently and unobtrusively in the course of the first epoch of that Age, for the systematic propagation of its teachings in all the continents and chief islands of the globe". This aim was achieved through the launching of "a series of national Plans as well as a World Crusade". He also mentioned that, in the course of this epoch, "God's infant Faith" was "gradually emerging from obscurity". Further, in the appointment of the Hands of the Cause and the introduction of the Auxiliary Boards, definite steps were taken to bring into existence a vital institution of the Administrative Order, and in the election of the Universal House of Justice a few years after the passing of the Guardian, the "last and crowning stage in the erection of the framework" of that Order was reached.

- As you know, the Guardian spoke of the launching of a series of "worldwide enterprises" destined to be embarked upon, in "future epochs", by the Universal House of Justice, enterprises that would "symbolize the unity and coordinate and unify the activities" of National Assemblies. So it was that a message written in October 1963 by the House of Justice to the Bahá'í world regarding the Nine Year Plan, the first global Plan following the World Crusade, concluded with this announcement: "Beloved friends, the Cause of God, guarded and nurtured since its inception by God's Messengers, by the Center of His Covenant and by His Sign on earth, now enters a new epoch, the third of the Formative Age." It was further explained in the message that, during this epoch, the Faith would "grow rapidly in size, increase its spiritual cohesion and executive ability, develop its institutions and extend its influence into all strata of society." The period of the third epoch encompassed three global Plans. The Continental Boards of Counsellors were also brought into existence, as was the International Teaching Centre.

- At the end of 1985, in anticipation of the launch of a six-year global Plan the following Riḍván, the House of Justice convened a gathering in the Holy Land for all Continental Counsellors to deliberate, along with the International Teaching Centre, on the tasks and opportunities immediately ahead. "Who can doubt", it wrote to the Counsellors at the time, after highlighting some of these opportunities, "that we are now entering a period of unprecedented and unimaginable developments in the onward march of the

Faith?" Indeed, at the close of the Conference, the House of Justice announced its decision to the Bahá'í world for National Spiritual Assemblies to formulate "together with the Counsellors" for the first time the "national goals of the next Plan", in the pursuit of certain "overall objectives". "This new process", the House of Justice made clear, signalized the "inauguration of a new stage in the unfoldment of the Administrative Order." "Have no hesitation", it then stated, "in recognizing that this new development in the maturation of Bahá'í institutions marks the inception of the fourth epoch" of the Formative Age.

- The fruits of the collaboration between the Counsellors and the National Spiritual Assemblies became more and more evident in the ensuing years, over the course of two additional Plans. By 2000, a mere fifteen years later, as the time for another Counsellors' Conference drew near, "there were signs", the House of Justice indicated, "that the Faith had arrived at a point in its development beyond which a new horizon" opened before us. A change "in culture of the Bahá'í community" had occurred "as training institutes emerged, as the construction projects on Mount Carmel approached their completion, and as the internal processes of institutional consolidation and the external processes towards world unity became more fully synchronized." On 14 January 2001 a conference was held in the Holy Land to mark the occupation by the International Teaching Centre of its permanent seat on Mount Carmel. Some one thousand Auxiliary Board members from across the globe were in attendance, along with the Counsellors, the members of the Teaching Centre, and the two Hands of the Cause of God still living at the time. In its message of 16 January addressed to the Bahá'í world, the House of Justice acknowledged that "the new height in the evolution" reached by the institution of the Counsellors was "a reflection" of "the measure to which, with their wise and constant advice, the Spiritual Assemblies and other institutions of the world community have evolved." It then went on to state: "With a spirit of exultation we are moved to announce to you: the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh now enters the fifth epoch of its Formative Age."

- Over the next twenty years, the Bahá'í community pursued a series of four five-year Plans, which took it to the end of the first century of the Formative Age of Bahá'u'lláh's Dispensation in 2021. By its close, the Bahá'í world stood ready to focus its energies on one overarching objective—that of releasing, in "ever-greater measures", the "society-building power of the Faith". Such a lofty goal, the aim of the current series of Plans, was made possible by the "significant advances achieved" and the "heightened capacities developed" by treading the "path of learning and systematic action", which had led to "the progress and development of the individual, the community, and the institutions" and to "the evolution of the relationships among them throughout the world". A "new and deeper understanding of the high aims of the Faith for the spiritual and social advancement of the world of humanity" had emerged. "Never in its history", the Universal House of Justice observed, had the Bahá'í community experienced "such a degree of collaboration with the rest of society and of commonality in goals and views in the path of service." So it was that, at Riḍván 2022, the House of Justice announced that, "in the extraordinary rise in capacity" which had occurred in the last two decades, it saw "incontrovertible evidence" that the Cause of God had entered the "sixth epoch of its Formative Age".

Every epoch is distinguished by certain features, and all of us are participating in those processes which are gradually bringing into reality the potential latent in this sixth epoch of the

Formative Age. As we do so, the powerful spiritual forces at play enable the community of the Greatest Name to fulfill its God-given mission epoch after epoch. The Universal House of Justice, in its Riḍván 2022 message to the Bahá'ís of the world, expresses its confidence in the ability of the community to achieve the objectives of the Nine Year Plan that was launched at the opening of the sixth epoch of the Formative Age. It states in that message:

> **"Such objectives could not be realistically contemplated if administrative institutions and agencies had not evolved markedly, endowing them with significantly heightened capacity to manage the affairs of a community whose activities have multiplied so quickly, embracing a vast and growing number of kindred souls. It would not be possible to aspire to such growth if a desire to learn—to act, to reflect, to capture insights, and to absorb the insights emerging elsewhere—had not been cultivated at all levels, extending to the grassroots of the community. And the effort implied by such projections would hardly be feasible if a systematic approach to the teaching work and to human resource development had not become increasingly manifest in the Bahá'í world. All this has brought about an advance in the Bahá'í community's awareness of its own identity and purpose. A determination to be outward looking in the process of community building had already become an established aspect of culture in many, many places; it has now blossomed, in a rising number of communities, into a sense of real responsibility for the spiritual and material progress of larger and larger groups within society, well beyond the membership of the Bahá'í community itself. The efforts of the friends to build communities, to engage in social action, and to contribute to the prevalent discourses of society have cohered into one global enterprise, bound together by a common framework for action, focused on helping humanity to establish its affairs on a foundation of spiritual principles. The significance of the developments we have described, reaching this point one hundred years after the inauguration of the Administrative Order, cannot be overlooked."[54]**

In light of what you have read above and drawing on other available resources, you may wish to write down below when the first five epochs of the Formative Age began and ended and what distinguished each one.

a. The first epoch of the Formative Age: _____

_____

_____

_____

b. The second epoch of the Formative Age: _____

_____

_____

_____

c. The third epoch of the Formative Age: _____

_____

_____

_____

d. The fourth epoch of the Formative Age: _____

_____

_____

_____

e. The fifth epoch of the Formative Age: _____

_____

_____

_____

Now, when did the sixth epoch of the Formative Age begin, and what have been some of the accomplishments of the worldwide community during this epoch up to now?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

It is suggested that you discuss the following questions with your group:

- How does an understanding of the trajectory of the Faith's development from one epoch to another reinforce our commitment to the Cause of God?

- Why is a sense of history and a scheme for the organization of time so important for us as a community? What are some of the dangers of being "ahistorical", of neglecting to place processes and events in an historical context?

- How does the main sequence of institute courses develop the capacity to place the evolution of the institutions and processes of the Faith in historical context? Which of the courses you have studied so far along the main sequence have contributed most notably to the development of this capacity?

## SECTION 20

It seems fitting to conclude the historical narrative that we began to trace in Section 17 by reflecting on the following passage from the Guardian, part of which you studied earlier in the unit. The passage refers to the Golden Age of the Bahá'í Era, during the course of which, Shoghi Effendi writes on another occasion, "the banner of the Most Great Peace" will be "unfurled", "the World Bahá'í Commonwealth will have emerged in the plenitude of its power

and splendor", and "the birth and efflorescence of a world civilization" will have conferred "its inestimable blessings upon all mankind".

> **"The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, whose supreme mission is none other but the achievement of this organic and spiritual unity of the whole body of nations, should, if we be faithful to its implications, be regarded as signalizing through its advent the *coming of age of the entire human race*. It should be viewed not merely as yet another spiritual revival in the ever-changing fortunes of mankind, not only as a further stage in a chain of progressive Revelations, nor even as the culmination of one of a series of recurrent prophetic cycles, but rather as marking the last and highest stage in the stupendous evolution of man's collective life on this planet. The emergence of a world community, the consciousness of world citizenship, the founding of a world civilization and culture—all of which must synchronize with the initial stages in the unfoldment of the Golden Age of the Bahá'í Era—should, by their very nature, be regarded, as far as this planetary life is concerned, as the furthermost limits in the organization of human society, though man, as an individual, will, nay must indeed as a result of such a consummation, continue indefinitely to progress and develop.**
>
> **"That mystic, all-pervasive, yet indefinable change, which we associate with the stage of maturity inevitable in the life of the individual and the development of the fruit must, if we would correctly apprehend the utterances of Bahá'u'lláh, have its counterpart in the evolution of the organization of human society. A similar stage must sooner or later be attained in the collective life of mankind, producing an even more striking phenomenon in world relations, and endowing the whole human race with such potentialities of well-being as shall provide, throughout the succeeding ages, the chief incentive required for the eventual fulfillment of its high destiny."**[55]

## SECTION 21

Our discussions over the past few sections have brought into focus the scheme for the organization of historical time delineated for us by the Guardian. Within this scheme, we recognize in the Dispensation of the Báb the opening of a new cycle in human history, the Cycle of Fulfillment, during which humanity will attain its maturity—a stage that will witness the unification of the human race and the rise of a glorious civilization. The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh endows humanity with both the spiritual power and the knowledge it needs to make this transition. As we learn to tap into the source of this tremendous power and knowledge and to serve with greater and greater commitment the Cause we love so dearly, we must be ever conscious of our interactions with countless forces at work in society, some emerging and expanding their sphere of influence and others becoming quickly spent. Let us try to analyze the operation of these forces. The Guardian tells us:

> **"As we view the world around us, we are compelled to observe the manifold evidences of that universal fermentation which, in every continent of the globe and in every department of human life, be it religious, social, economic or political, is purging and reshaping humanity in anticipation of the Day when the wholeness of the human race will have been recognized and its unity established. A twofold process, however, can be distinguished, each tending, in its own way and with an**

**accelerated momentum, to bring to a climax the forces that are transforming the face of our planet. The first is essentially an integrating process, while the second is fundamentally disruptive. The former, as it steadily evolves, unfolds a System which may well serve as a pattern for that world polity towards which a strangely disordered world is continually advancing; while the latter, as its disintegrating influence deepens, tends to tear down, with increasing violence, the antiquated barriers that seek to block humanity's progress towards its destined goal. The constructive process stands associated with the nascent Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, and is the harbinger of the New World Order that Faith must erelong establish. The destructive forces that characterize the other should be identified with a civilization that has refused to answer to the expectation of a new age, and is consequently falling into chaos and decline."**[56]

**"The contrast between the accumulating evidences of steady consolidation that accompany the rise of the Administrative Order of the Faith of God, and the forces of disintegration which batter at the fabric of a travailing society, is as clear as it is arresting. Both within and outside the Bahá'í world the signs and tokens which, in a mysterious manner, are heralding the birth of that World Order, the establishment of which must signalize the Golden Age of the Cause of God, are growing and multiplying day by day. No fair-minded observer can any longer fail to discern them. He cannot be misled by the painful slowness characterizing the unfoldment of the civilization which the followers of Bahá'u'lláh are laboring to establish. Nor can he be deluded by the ephemeral manifestations of returning prosperity which at times appear to be capable of checking the disruptive influence of the chronic ills afflicting the institutions of a decaying age. The signs of the times are too numerous and compelling to allow him to mistake their character or to belittle their significance. He can, if he be fair in his judgment, recognize in the chain of events which proclaim on the one hand the irresistible march of the institutions directly associated with the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and foreshadow on the other the downfall of those powers and principalities that have either ignored or opposed it—he can recognize in them all evidences of the operation of God's all-pervasive Will, the shaping of His perfectly ordered and world-embracing Plan."**[57]

These two passages, so penetrating in their analysis of the forces operating in society today, merit our thoughtful reflection. They contain several essential ideas that should be clear in our minds as we progress in our study, and you are encouraged, in this light, to complete the sentences below, in keeping with the first passage.

a. Shoghi Effendi tells us that, if we view the world around us, we will be compelled to observe the many evidences of that _____ which is _____ and _____ humanity in anticipation of the Day when the _____ will have been recognized and its _____ .

b. He makes clear that the evidences of this universal fermentation can be observed in every _____ of the globe and in every _____ of human life, be it _____ , _____ , _____ or _____ .

c. Yet, in observing the world around us, we can also distinguish, Shoghi Effendi mentions, a _____ , each tending, in its _____ and with an _____ , to bring to a _____ the _____ _____ .

d. The first process is _____ , while the second is _____ .

e. Describing the first, the Guardian indicates that,

- as it steadily evolves, it unfolds _____ _____ _____ _____
- constructive in nature, it stands associated with _____ _____ _____

f. Referring to the second process, Shoghi Effendi states that,

- as its disintegrating influence deepens, it tends to _____ _____ _____ _____
- it is characterized by destructive forces, which should be identified with ____ _____ _____ _____

In the second passage, the Guardian asks us to note the contrast between the many evidences of the steady consolidation of the Administrative Order and the forces of disintegration tearing at the fabric of society. There are signs and tokens everywhere, he tells us, proclaiming the birth of the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. The following exercises may help you think through some of the implications of the statements made by the Guardian in this regard:

1. Complete the sentences below.

a. No fair-minded observer, the Guardian states,

- will fail to discern _____ _____

– will be misled by _____

_____

_____

– will be deluded by _____

_____

_____

_____

b. If, the Guardian continues, this individual be fair in his judgment, he will recognize in the chain of events, which on the one hand proclaim the irresistible _____

_____

_____ and which on the other foreshadow _____

_____ ,

the evidences of the _____ , the

_____

_____ .

2. Reflect in your group on the warning raised by the Guardian not to be misled by "the painful slowness characterizing the unfoldment of the civilization" that we are working to establish. How are we to understand the "slowness" of which he speaks? Clearly, it cannot describe the tempo of our activity, for the responsibilities we shoulder as a community demand from us intensity of action. It seems more reasonable to assume that "slowness" here refers to the nature of the civilization-building process in which we are engaged and to the magnitude of the transformation that has to occur in the structure of society. Processes as far-reaching as the ones set in motion by the Plans of the Faith require time to progressively gather momentum. In your reflections on this statement of the Guardian, then, you may wish to think of the efforts of the worldwide Bahá'í community in terms of the capacity that is being built in the individual, the community, and the institutions of the Faith through successive stages of the Divine Plan, a theme you reflected upon in the third unit of Book 8. The following are only examples of themes that your group may wish to explore:

a. The capacity to expand and strengthen educational processes aimed at the spiritual empowerment of individuals and communities: _____

_____

_____

_____

b. The capacity to achieve greater and greater coherence between the spiritual and the material in the life of the family and the community: _____

_____

_____

_____

c. The capacity to examine and redefine foundational concepts, like "power", "authority", and "freedom": _____

_____

_____

_____

d. The capacity to forge bonds of love that unite the hearts of a vast number of diverse people: _____

_____

_____

_____

e. The capacity to promote justice: _____

_____

_____

_____

f. The capacity to foster the kind of relationships among the individual, the community, and the institutions of the Faith that passage to maturity requires: _____

_____

_____

_____

Now, in light of what you have written above, think about the fact that the Bahá'í community began not so long ago as a small band of people laboring under the most severe persecution in the birthplace of the Faith. Are not the advances made by this community in all the above areas auspicious indeed?

3. Next, reflect on the Guardian's second warning, not to be deluded by "ephemeral manifestations of returning prosperity". In your discussions, you may wish to focus on the history of your region, your country or the entire world. How many times in the decades since the inception of the Faith have there been moments of jubilation at the sight of an apparent elimination of oppression, an oppression that only changes form, deepens, and becomes more widespread? A war to end all wars, a political coalition to end constant strife, an economic program to eliminate poverty, a technology designed to bring education instantaneously to every part of the planet—these are just a few examples of the many "ephemeral manifestations of returning prosperity" you will find. As you examine each, try to identify some of the fundamental reasons that it could not, in the end, deliver on its promises.

_____

_____

_____

Whenever we engage in reflections as suggested above, we come to appreciate the significance of the path on which Bahá'u'lláh has set His followers. Let us end this section, then, with the study of the following passage written by the Guardian:

> **"Not even, I venture to assert, would the very act of devising the machinery required for the political and economic unification of the world—a principle that has been increasingly advocated in recent times—provide in itself the antidote against the poison that is steadily undermining the vigor of organized peoples and nations. What else, might we not confidently affirm, but the unreserved acceptance of the Divine Program enunciated, with such simplicity and force as far back as sixty years ago, by Bahá'u'lláh, embodying in its essentials God's divinely appointed scheme for the unification of mankind in this age, coupled with an indomitable conviction in the unfailing efficacy of each and all of its provisions, is eventually capable of withstanding the forces of internal disintegration which, if unchecked, must needs continue to eat into the vitals of a despairing society. It is towards this goal—the goal of a new World Order, Divine in origin, all-embracing in scope, equitable in principle, challenging in its features—that a harassed humanity must strive."[58]**

## SECTION 22

In the first passage quoted in the preceding section, the Guardian refers to the twofold process that is bringing about the transformation of human society. However confident we are in the eventual ascendance of the integrative forces at work in the world, it is clear from his statement that the forces of disintegration will continue to gather momentum. Though we need not dwell on them here, we must keep in mind that the Bahá'í community itself is affected by

their operation. Writing in December 1938, less than a year before the outbreak of the Second World War, the Guardian raises the following warning in this connection:

> **"These recurrent crises which, with ominous frequency and resistless force, are afflicting an ever-increasing portion of the human race must of necessity continue, however impermanently, to exercise, in a certain measure, their baleful influence upon a world community which has spread its ramifications to the uttermost ends of the earth. How can the beginnings of a world upheaval, unleashing forces that are so gravely deranging the social, the religious, the political, and the economic equilibrium of organized society, throwing into chaos and confusion political systems, racial doctrines, social conceptions, cultural standards, religious associations, and trade relationships—how can such agitations, on a scale so vast, so unprecedented, fail to produce any repercussions on the institutions of a Faith of such tender age whose teachings have a direct and vital bearing on each of these spheres of human life and conduct?**
>
> **"Little wonder, therefore, if they who are holding aloft the banner of so pervasive a Faith, so challenging a Cause, find themselves affected by the impact of these world-shaking forces. Little wonder if they find that in the midst of this whirlpool of contending passions their freedom has been curtailed, their tenets contemned, their institutions assaulted, their motives maligned, their authority jeopardized, their claim rejected."[59]**

Evidence of the disintegration of the old order is everywhere apparent in the world. Below are the kinds of signs mentioned by Shoghi Effendi in his writings, some of which are familiar to you from your study of Book 5. Can you say a few words about each condition and the way it can affect the individual believer, the community, and the institutions of the Faith?

a. Decline of religion as a social force: _____
_____
_____
_____
_____

b. Recrudescence of religious intolerance, of racial animosity, and of patriotic arrogance: _____
_____
_____
_____
_____

c. Increasing evidences of selfishness, of suspicion, of fear, and of fraud: _____
_____
_____
_____
_____

d. Spread of terrorism, of lawlessness, of drunkenness, and of crime: _____

e. Unquenchable thirst for, and feverish pursuit after, earthly vanities, riches, and pleasures: _____

f. Weakening of family solidarity: _____

g. Laxity in parental control: _____

h. Irresponsible attitude towards marriage and the consequent rising tide of divorce:

i. Degeneracy of art and music: _____

j. Corruption of the press: _____

_____

_____

k. Breakdown of political and economic structure: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

l. Swelling number of unemployed: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Now, below is a list of some of the characteristics of the Bahá'í community. With the other members of your group, discuss how each helps to counteract some of the effects on the individual, the community or the institutions of the Faith that you noted above. After having done so, write in the space provided a short paragraph that sums up your discussions.

- Spiritual disciplines of praying daily, reading the Writings, and calling oneself to account each day

- Refusal to gossip and backbite

- Adherence to a standard of conduct that calls for chastity before marriage and complete faithfulness to one's partner after marriage

- Attention given to the spiritual education of children

- Recognition of early adolescence as a stage crucial in the life of the individual and the importance attached, accordingly, to the spiritual empowerment of junior youth

- Emphasis on building capacity through a process in which all see themselves as walking a common path of service that encourages action, reflection on action, and consultation—a process that, at every step, is accompanied by systematic study of the writings of the Faith

- Practice of visiting one another to strengthen bonds of friendship, to deepen in the knowledge of the writings, and to engage in conversation on spiritual matters

- Practice of holding regular devotional gatherings

- Determination to eliminate all forms of prejudice

- Refusal to divide into factions

- Refusal to participate in partisan political activity

- Consistent application of the principle of consultation in all matters
- Determination to abide by the decision of the majority in a consultative body and to carry it out with joy and commitment
- Love and trust shown to Local and National Spiritual Assemblies, even if one does not feel a decision they have taken is necessarily correct
- Duty of the institutions to bring into their confidence those whom they serve and to win their genuine support and respect
- Vigilance of Bahá'í institutions in upholding the laws of Bahá'u'lláh with love and justice
- Strict adherence to confidentiality by the institutions and their reluctance to make known the misconduct of individual believers beyond what is needed to protect the community as a whole
- Practice of conducting elections for the members of Bahá'í institutions in a prayerful atmosphere, with no nominations
- Practice of gathering together every nineteen days for worship, consultation on collective affairs, and fellowship
- Practice of gathering together for reflection so that those engaged in activities can review recent progress and identify the next steps to be taken
- Determination to exercise initiative within the framework for action defined by the global Plans launched by the Universal House of Justice
- Posture of learning adopted by the individual, the community, and the institutions in translating the teachings into reality
- Obligation to uphold the principle of harmony between science and religion
- Constant endeavor to share with all humanity Bahá'u'lláh's teachings liberally, unconditionally, and with utmost humility

## SECTION 23

As we strive to develop further and further the distinct characteristics of the community of Bahá'u'lláh's followers—protecting ourselves from the destructive forces that hinder our efforts and doing our best to align ourselves with the forces of integration—we must keep in mind the vision of a far future that the writings of the Faith trace out for us. This is not the place to study the numerous passages that offer us glimpses of the future; such an undertaking needs to be carried out, to a great extent, in one's personal deepening. However, let us read here just one passage written by the Guardian, which provides us with so many exhilarating images:

> **"The unity of the human race, as envisaged by Bahá'u'lláh, implies the establishment of a world commonwealth in which all nations, races, creeds and classes are closely and permanently united, and in which the autonomy of its state members and the personal freedom and initiative of the individuals that compose them are definitely and completely safeguarded. This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples. A world executive, backed by an international Force, will carry out the decisions arrived at, and apply the laws enacted by, this world legislature, and will safeguard the organic unity of the whole commonwealth. A world tribunal will adjudicate and deliver its compulsory and final verdict in all and any disputes that may arise between the various elements constituting this universal system. A mechanism of world intercommunication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvelous swiftness and perfect regularity. A world metropolis will act as the nerve center of a world**

**civilization, the focus towards which the unifying forces of life will converge and from which its energizing influences will radiate. A world language will either be invented or chosen from among the existing languages and will be taught in the schools of all the federated nations as an auxiliary to their mother tongue. A world script, a world literature, a uniform and universal system of currency, of weights and measures, will simplify and facilitate intercourse and understanding among the nations and races of mankind. In such a world society, science and religion, the two most potent forces in human life, will be reconciled, will cooperate, and will harmoniously develop. The press will, under such a system, while giving full scope to the expression of the diversified views and convictions of mankind, cease to be mischievously manipulated by vested interests, whether private or public, and will be liberated from the influence of contending governments and peoples. The economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be coordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated.**

**"National rivalries, hatreds, and intrigues will cease, and racial animosity and prejudice will be replaced by racial amity, understanding and cooperation. The causes of religious strife will be permanently removed, economic barriers and restrictions will be completely abolished, and the inordinate distinction between classes will be obliterated. Destitution on the one hand, and gross accumulation of ownership on the other, will disappear. The enormous energy dissipated and wasted on war, whether economic or political, will be consecrated to such ends as will extend the range of human inventions and technical development, to the increase of the productivity of mankind, to the extermination of disease, to the extension of scientific research, to the raising of the standard of physical health, to the sharpening and refinement of the human brain, to the exploitation of the unused and unsuspected resources of the planet, to the prolongation of human life, and to the furtherance of any other agency that can stimulate the intellectual, the moral, and spiritual life of the entire human race.**

**"A world federal system, ruling the whole earth and exercising unchallengeable authority over its unimaginably vast resources, blending and embodying the ideals of both the East and the West, liberated from the curse of war and its miseries, and bent on the exploitation of all the available sources of energy on the surface of the planet, a system in which Force is made the servant of Justice, whose life is sustained by its universal recognition of one God and by its allegiance to one common Revelation—such is the goal towards which humanity, impelled by the unifying forces of life, is moving."[60]**

Throughout our lives, we each repeatedly study passages such as the one above in order to gain a better understanding of the purpose underlying Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation. Naturally, in conversation with friends and acquaintances, we often share one or another aspect of our vision of humanity's future. Some, suffering from the widespread cynicism that pervades a dying world order, consider our statements merely an expression of a utopian dream. Others find in them ideals that resonate with the deepest longings of their hearts. Yet, however compelling the vision towards which the world is moving, we cannot be content to speak simply of the goal itself. We must be ready to describe how the efforts of the Bahá'í community are helping humanity to advance, albeit slowly, towards the civilization envisaged. A discussion in your group of themes such as the ones below may prove worthwhile in this respect.

- The way human society has evolved since Bahá'u'lláh's time
- The operation of the power of the Covenant
- The existence of the Universal House of Justice and the way it is guiding the Bahá'í community
- The organic growth of the community and its Administrative Order
- Some of the achievements of the Bahá'í community that show how the peoples of the world can move towards Bahá'u'lláh's vision for humanity

## SECTION 24

Whatever the glimpses we catch of the workings of the future World Order, its beauty and harmony never fail to overwhelm us. Such glimpses also serve to inspire us in our efforts to address the exigencies of the historical moment in which we live. It is the challenge of every generation to ensure that the potential latent in the Plans set forth by the Head of the Faith is realized to the greatest extent possible, opening the way for the next, more ambitious stage of endeavor. The brief overview we undertook of the various epochs of the Formative Age in Section 19 provided us with a sense of how the generations that came before us have advanced this historical process. The question we must ask ourselves here is, what is the community of the Greatest Name being asked to accomplish at this time? In its Riḍván 2010 message, the Universal House of Justice states:

> **"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 endeavor 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.**
>
> **"In this long-term process of capacity building, the Bahá'í community has devoted nearly a decade and a half to systematizing its experience in the teaching field, learning to open certain activities to more and more people and to sustain its expansion and consolidation. All are welcome to enter the community's warm embrace and receive sustenance from Bahá'u'lláh's life-giving message. No greater joy is there, to be sure, than for a soul, yearning for the Truth, to find shelter in the stronghold of the Cause and draw strength from the unifying power of the Covenant. Yet every human being and every group of individuals, irrespective of whether they are counted among His followers, can take inspiration from His teachings, benefiting from whatever gems of wisdom and knowledge will**

**aid them in addressing the challenges they face. Indeed, the civilization that beckons humanity will not be attained through the efforts of the Bahá'í community alone. Numerous groups and organizations, animated by the spirit of world solidarity that is an indirect manifestation of Bahá'u'lláh's conception of the principle of the oneness of humankind, will contribute to the civilization destined to emerge out of the welter and chaos of present-day society. It should be clear to everyone that the capacity created in the Bahá'í community over successive global Plans renders it increasingly able to lend assistance in the manifold and diverse dimensions of civilization building, opening to it new frontiers of learning."**[61]

And it writes in its Riḍván 2024 message:

**"Two years of a formidable nine-year endeavor have sped by. The friends of God have taken its objectives firmly to heart. Across the Bahá'í world there is an increased depth of understanding about what is required to further extend the process of community building and effect profound social transformation. But with every passing day, we see too the condition of the world grow more desperate, its divisions more severe. The escalating tensions within societies and between nations affect peoples and places in a myriad ways.**

**"This demands from every conscientious soul a response. We are all too aware that the community of the Greatest Name cannot expect to be unaffected by the travails of society. Yet, though it is affected by these travails, it is not confused by them; it is saddened by humanity's sufferings, but not paralyzed by them. Heartfelt concern must prompt sustained effort to build communities that offer hope in place of despair, unity in place of conflict.**

**"Shoghi Effendi described clearly how a process of 'progressive deterioration in human affairs' is occurring in parallel with another process, a process of integration, through which the 'Ark of human salvation', society's 'ultimate haven', is being built up. We rejoice to see, in every country and region, true practitioners of peace occupied with building this haven. We see it in every account of a heart being enkindled with the love of God, a family opening up its home to new friends, collaborators drawing on Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to address a social problem, a community strengthening a culture of mutual support, a neighborhood or village learning to initiate and sustain the actions necessary for its own spiritual and material progress, a locality being blessed with the emergence of a new Spiritual Assembly.**

**"The methods and instruments of the Plan allow every soul to contribute a share of what humanity needs in this day. Far from offering a temporary salve for the ills of the moment, the prosecution of the Plan is the means by which long-term, constructive processes, unfolding over generations, are being set in motion in every society."**[62]

In these and other messages, the Universal House of Justice encourages us to think of our efforts as a community today in terms of three broad areas of action. The first is concerned with the expansion and consolidation of the community itself, which has been the subject of so many units of the books in this series. Indeed, one of the principal aims of the series is to help

increase capacity to participate in this area of action. As to the second and third areas, there will be entire units further along in the sequence dedicated to the question of social action, on the one hand, and participation in the discourses of society, on the other. As we bring to an end our exploration of the Formative Age of the Faith and the nature of humanity's transition to maturity, it seems fitting to turn our attention to the sublime document that will continue to energize our civilization-building efforts through the successive epochs of this age.

## SECTION 25

The systematic propagation of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings is achieved through a series of global Plans, each of which marks a stage in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan. This stupendous process receives its impulse from the Tablets of the Divine Plan, a document to which the Guardian referred as the "mandate" and "supreme charter for teaching". From our study of Book 8, we know that, having spent a lifetime in imprisonment and exile, 'Abdu'l-Bahá set out in the autumn of 1910 at the age of sixty-six, "in failing health", "unfamiliar with Western customs and languages", "without thought of comfort", and "utterly reliant upon divine assistance" to proclaim the Cause of His Father in Europe and North America. In its message of 29 August 2010, marking the one-hundred-year anniversary of His departure from Haifa, the Universal House of Justice states:

> **"The words uttered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His travels, and the deeds He undertook with such consummate wisdom and love, offer an abundance of inspiration and manifold insights from which the body of the believers can today draw, whether in their efforts to embrace receptive souls, to raise capacity for service, to build local communities, to strengthen institutions, or to exploit opportunities emerging to engage in social action and contribute to public discourse."[63]**

Eight months after 'Abdu'l-Bahá's return to the Holy Land, the First World War broke out, a war He had repeatedly foreshadowed "in the dark warnings He uttered in the course of His western travels". The Holy Land was profoundly affected by this worldwide conflagration, and for a time the perils which had confronted Him during the years of His incarceration in 'Akká were renewed. The Guardian tells us:

> **"Agony filled His soul at the spectacle of human slaughter precipitated through humanity's failure to respond to the summons He had issued, or to heed the warnings He had given. Surely sorrow upon sorrow was added to the burden of trials and vicissitudes which He, since His boyhood, had borne so heroically for the sake, and in the service, of His Father's Cause.**
>
> **"And yet during these somber days, the darkness of which was reminiscent of the tribulations endured during the most dangerous period of His incarceration in the prison-fortress of 'Akká; 'Abdu'l-Bahá, whilst in the precincts of His Father's Shrine, or when dwelling in the House He occupied in 'Akká, or under the shadow of the Báb's sepulcher on Mt. Carmel, was moved to confer once again, and for the last time in His life, on the community of His American followers a signal mark of His special favor by investing them, on the eve of the termination of His earthly ministry, through the revelation of the Tablets of the Divine Plan, with a world mission, whose full implications even now, after the lapse of a quarter of a century,**

**still remain undisclosed, and whose unfoldment thus far, though as yet in its initial stages, has so greatly enriched the spiritual as well as the administrative annals of the first Bahá'í century."[64]**

On 26 March 2016, the centenary of the revelation by 'Abdu'l-Bahá of the first of the fourteen Tablets, the Universal House of Justice addressed a spiritually charged message to the Bahá'í world. We ask you to read the message in its entirety, which is shared below. As you do so, call to mind the various points we have discussed in this unit and note the way in which the message puts all that we do in perspective.

**"Today at dawn, on your behalf, the members of the Universal House of Justice gathered with the members of the International Teaching Centre in the Master's room at the house in Bahjí to commemorate that pivotal moment when the first of the Tablets of the Divine Plan was revealed by the pen of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Prayers from those wondrous Tablets were offered in thanksgiving for the glorious achievements of the past. Divine assistance was sought in support of the labors required in the forthcoming stage of the Plan's unfoldment. And heavenly bounties were implored to ensure still greater victories in meeting the challenges of future stages, one after another, reaching as far as the fringes of the Golden Age.**

**"The Divine Plan, that sublime series of letters addressed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the Bahá'ís of North America between 26 March 1916 and 8 March 1917, constitutes one of the mighty Charters of His Father's Faith. Set forth in those fourteen Tablets, Shoghi Effendi explains, is 'the mightiest Plan ever generated through the creative power of the Most Great Name.' It is 'impelled by forces beyond our power to predict or appraise' and 'claims as the theater for its operation territories spread over five continents and the islands of the seven seas.' Within it are held 'the seeds of the world's spiritual revival and ultimate redemption.'**

**"In the Tablets of the Divine Plan 'Abdu'l-Bahá not only provided the broad vision necessary to carry out the responsibilities entrusted by Bahá'u'lláh to His loved ones, but He also outlined spiritual concepts and practical strategies necessary for success. In His exhortations to teach and to travel to teach; to arise personally or deputize others; to move to all parts of the world and open countries and territories, each meticulously named; to learn the relevant languages and translate and disseminate the Sacred Texts; to train the teachers of the Faith and especially youth; to teach the masses and, particularly, indigenous peoples; to be firm in the Covenant and protect the Faith; and to sow seeds and cultivate them in a process of organic growth, we find hallmarks of the entire series of Plans—each a specific stage of the Divine Plan shaped by the Head of the Faith—that will continue to unfold throughout the Formative Age.**

**"The initial response to the Tablets of the Divine Plan was limited to the noble exploits of a few who, like the immortal Martha Root, arose independently. It was Shoghi Effendi who assisted the Bahá'ís of the world to gradually grasp the significance of this Charter and learn to approach its requirements in a systematic manner. The Plan was held in abeyance for nearly twenty years while the Administrative Order took shape, after which communities were patiently guided to conduct national plans, including the two Seven Year Plans in North America that constituted the first stages of the Divine Plan, until finally, in 1953, all could**

**unite in the first global Plan, the Ten Year Crusade. Shoghi Effendi looked beyond that crucial decade to 'the launching of worldwide enterprises destined to be embarked upon, in future epochs' of the Formative Age, 'by the Universal House of Justice, that will symbolize the unity and coordinate and unify the activities of these National Assemblies.' The Divine Plan continues at the present time with the intensive effort to establish a pattern of community life that can embrace thousands upon thousands in clusters that cover the face of the planet. Let every Bahá'í appreciate, more deeply than ever before, that the provisions of the next stage of the Divine Plan set forth in our recent message to the Counsellors' Conference comprise the challenging requirements of the present hour—requirements both urgent and sacred, which, when sacrificially and persistently addressed, may hasten 'the advent of that Golden Age which must witness the proclamation of the Most Great Peace and the unfoldment of that world civilization which is the offspring and primary purpose of that Peace.'**

**"How is it possible to adequately convey our feelings of irrepressible love and unbounded admiration as we reflect on the exploits of the members of your communities, past and present, in pursuit of your sacred mission? The vision that unfolds before our eyes is of a grassroots stirring, an organic flowering, a resistless movement that has grown imperceptibly at times and at others in great surges to eventually embrace the entire world: God-intoxicated lovers exceeding their personal capacities, embryonic institutions learning to exercise their powers for the well-being of humanity, communities emerging as shelters and schools in which human potential is nourished. We pay homage to the humblest ministrations and ceaseless endeavors of the Faith's devoted rank and file, as well as to the extraordinary accomplishments of its heroes, knights, and martyrs. On vast continents and scattered islands, from arctic regions to desert climes, atop mountain plateaus and across lowland plains, in crowded urban quarters and villages along rivers and jungle paths, you and your spiritual forebears brought the message of the Blessed Beauty to peoples and nations. You sacrificed rest and comfort and left your homes to journey to unfamiliar lands or homefront outposts. You set aside your own interests for the common good. Whatever your means, you sacrificially contributed your share of resources. You taught the Faith to multitudes, to groups in various settings, and to individuals in your homes. You quickened souls and helped them on their own paths of service, disseminated widely the Bahá'í writings and participated in deep study of the teachings, strove for excellence in all fields, engaged diverse peoples of all strata in conversations pertaining to the search for solutions to humanity's ills, and initiated efforts for economic and social development. Though misunderstandings and problems sometimes arose, you forgave one another and marched together in serried lines. You raised the framework of the Administrative Order and clung steadfastly to the Covenant, protecting the Faith from every blow directed against it. In your ardor for the Beloved, you endured prejudice and estrangement, privation and loneliness, persecution and imprisonment. You welcomed and nurtured generations of children and youth upon whom the vitality of the Faith and future of humanity depend, and as tested veterans, you heeded the Master's admonition to serve until your last breath. You have written the story of the unfoldment of the Divine Plan on the scroll of its first century. Before you, beloved friends, lies stretched out the blank scroll of the future on which you and your spiritual**

**descendants will inscribe fresh and lasting deeds of renunciation and heroism for the betterment of the world."**[65]

## SECTION 26

In the next unit of this book, we will examine several passages from messages and letters written by the Universal House of Justice, or on its behalf, that shed light on the way we approach our tasks and responsibilities as a community at this historical juncture. Parallel to our exploration in that unit, you may wish to take the opportunity to study the Tablets of the Divine Plan, as encouraged in Book 8, if you have not already done so. Meanwhile, let us end this unit by reading the opening paragraphs of the final Tablet of that mighty Charter penned by 'Abdu'l-Bahá on 8 March 1917:

***"He is God!***
***"O ye heavenly souls, sons and daughters of the Kingdom:***

**"God says in the Qur'án: 'Take ye hold of the Cord of God, all of you, and become ye not disunited.'**

**"In the contingent world there are many collective centers which are conducive to association and unity between the children of men. For example, patriotism is a collective center; nationalism is a collective center; identity of interests is a collective center; political alliance is a collective center; the union of ideals is a collective center, and the prosperity of the world of humanity is dependent upon the organization and promotion of the collective centers. Nevertheless, all the above institutions are, in reality, the matter and not the substance, accidental and not eternal—temporary and not everlasting. With the appearance of great revolutions and upheavals, all these collective centers are swept away. But the Collective Center of the Kingdom, embodying the institutions and divine teachings, is the eternal Collective Center. It establishes relationship between the East and the West, organizes the oneness of the world of humanity, and destroys the foundation of differences. It overcomes and includes all the other collective centers. Like unto the ray of the sun, it dispels entirely the darkness encompassing all the regions, bestows ideal life, and causes the effulgence of divine illumination. Through the breaths of the Holy Spirit it performs miracles; the Orient and the Occident embrace each other, the North and South become intimates and associates, conflicting and contending opinions disappear, antagonistic aims are brushed aside, the law of the struggle for existence is abrogated, and the canopy of the oneness of the world of humanity is raised on the apex of the globe, casting its shade over all the races of men. Consequently, the real Collective Center is the body of the divine teachings, which include all the degrees and embrace all the universal relations and necessary laws of humanity."**[66]

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58. From a letter dated 28 November 1931 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the West, ibid., p. 34.

59. From a letter dated 25 December 1938 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of North America, published under the title *The Advent of Divine Justice*, par. 4–5, pp. 3–4.

60. From a letter dated 11 March 1936 written by Shoghi Effendi to the Bahá'ís of the West, published in *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, pp. 203–4.

61. From the Riḍván 2010 message to the Bahá'ís of the world, published in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 2001–2022*, no. 153.25–26, pp. 314–15; also in *Framework for Action*, no. 14.25–26, pp. 86–87.

62. From the Riḍván 2024 message to the Bahá'ís of the world, published in *The Nine Year Plan, 2022–2031: Messages of the Universal House of Justice, 183 B.E. Edition* (Ingleside: Bahá'í Publications Australia, 2026), par. 1–4, pp. 35–36.

63. From a message dated 29 August 2010 to the Bahá'ís of the world, published in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 2001–2022*, no. 159.3, p. 324; also in *Framework for Action*, no. 15.3, p. 94.

64. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. 483.

65. From a message dated 26 March 2016 to the Bahá'ís of the world, published in *Messages from the Universal House of Justice, 2001–2022*, no. 255.1–5, pp. 584–87; also in *Framework for Action*, no. 37.1–5, pp. 237–39.

66. From a Tablet to the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada, published in *Tablets of the Divine Plan: Revealed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the North American Bahá'ís* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1993, 2006 printing), no. 14.1–3, pp. 101–2.



# A Sacred Enterprise

## Purpose

To reflect on how the Bahá'í community contributes
to the advancement of civilization
and to examine the salient features of
the approach that characterizes all of its endeavors

## SECTION 1

The second unit of this book offered us an opportunity to explore the significance of the present age of transition. We considered first some of the attributes of a mature humanity and a few of the changes we might reasonably expect to occur in its collective life as it undergoes the upheavals associated with adolescence. This discussion opened the way for us to examine the unique nature of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation, to reflect on our level of commitment to the progress of His Cause, and to analyze how the Faith moves from one epoch to another. Within this context, we thought about the forces that are propelling the passage to maturity and about the characteristics of the Bahá'í community which enable its members to align themselves with the forces of integration. The question then naturally arose as to what the community of the Greatest Name is required to accomplish at this time. Three broad areas of action, identified by the Universal House of Justice, were mentioned—the expansion and consolidation of the community itself, engagement in social action, and involvement in the discourses of society. Noting that the latter two would be treated in future books in this sequence, we brought to an end our exploration of the nature of this historical moment by reflecting on the significance of the Tablets of the Divine Plan, the mandate and supreme charter for teaching.

What we propose to do in this unit is to examine certain features of our approach that, in general, characterize everything we do to serve the Cause and humanity. We may begin by asking how a community that believes in the necessity of such a profound transformation in the life of humankind—the rolling up of one order and the spreading out of another in its stead—conducts itself in a society the very structure of which it finds entirely defective. Traditional methods used to achieve radical change are, of course, categorically rejected by Bahá'ís. We shun violence and will not adopt methods that have, in the past, given rise to many a political revolution. We obey our governments. We will not conspire against any group or person, and we eschew sedition. At the same time, we find limited and insufficient the means commonly used to achieve social and political reform, means which often take the form of endless debates that pit goals and strategies against one another. The way we strive to achieve Bahá'u'lláh's vision for humanity differs fundamentally from those relied upon in the realm of politics to bring about reform or revolution.

What, then, we must ask ourselves, characterizes our approach as we resolutely work to transform society? Many of the desired characteristics are discussed in one context or another throughout the books of the Ruhi Institute, but it is important to step back and look at them in an orderly fashion as we seek to understand our mission at so crucial a point in history when the process of the entry of the peoples of the world into the Cause of God must steadily advance and the society-building power of the Faith find release in ever-greater measure.

## SECTION 2

Let us take up our exploration of the above question by studying a number of paragraphs from a message of the Universal House of Justice dated 2 March 2013. Addressed to the Bahá'ís of Iran, the message was written in response to the growing interest observed among the people of that country to understand "the posture held by Bahá'ís everywhere towards political activity". To help the believers explain to their fellow citizens the nature of their participation in the life of society, the House of Justice elucidates certain convictions and articles of belief that we need to keep in mind as we try to find answers to the question before us. To begin, the House of Justice reminds us of the Bahá'í view of history:

**"Inseparable from the Bahá'í perspective on politics is a particular conception of history, its course and direction. Humanity, it is the firm conviction of every follower of Bahá'u'lláh, is approaching today the crowning stage in a millennia-long process which has brought it from its collective infancy to the threshold of maturity—a stage that will witness the unification of the human race. Not unlike the individual who passes through the unsettled yet promising period of adolescence, during which latent powers and capacities come to light, humankind as a whole is in the midst of an unprecedented transition. Behind so much of the turbulence and commotion of contemporary life are the fits and starts of a humanity struggling to come of age. Widely accepted practices and conventions, cherished attitudes and habits, are one by one being rendered obsolete, as the imperatives of maturity begin to assert themselves.**

**"Bahá'ís are encouraged to see in the revolutionary changes taking place in every sphere of life the interaction of two fundamental processes. One is destructive in nature, while the other is integrative; both serve to carry humanity, each in its own way, along the path leading towards its full maturity. The operation of the former is everywhere apparent—in the vicissitudes that have afflicted time-honored institutions, in the impotence of leaders at all levels to mend the fractures appearing in the structure of society, in the dismantling of social norms that have long held in check unseemly passions, and in the despondency and indifference exhibited not only by individuals but also by entire societies that have lost any vital sense of purpose. Though devastating in their effects, the forces of disintegration tend to sweep away barriers that block humanity's progress, opening space for the process of integration to draw diverse groups together and disclosing new opportunities for cooperation and collaboration. Bahá'ís, of course, strive to align themselves, individually and collectively, with forces associated with the process of integration, which, they are confident, will continue to gain in strength, no matter how bleak the immediate horizons. Human affairs will be utterly reorganized, and an era of universal peace inaugurated.**

**"Such is the view of history that underlies every endeavor pursued by the Bahá'í community."**[1]

Many of the ideas presented by the House of Justice in the above passage were already the subject of our discussion in the preceding unit. It may, however, prove useful to pause here and, in light of the passage, give further thought to the processes of integration and disintegration underway in this age of transition.

1. The House of Justice states that the operation of the process of disintegration is apparent in the following conditions in society. Can you provide a few examples for each?

   a. Vicissitudes that have afflicted time-honored institutions

   _____

   _____

   _____

   b. Impotence of leaders at all levels to mend the fractures appearing in the structure of society

_____

_____

_____

c. Dismantling of social norms that have long held in check unseemly passions

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d. Despondency and indifference exhibited not only by individuals but also by entire societies that have lost any vital sense of purpose

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2. The forces of disintegration, though devastating, sweep away barriers that block humanity's progress. What are some of these barriers?

_____

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3. How is the removal of the barriers you identified in the previous question opening space for the process of integration to draw diverse groups together? How is it creating new opportunities for cooperation and collaboration?

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4. Now reflect with the other members of your group specifically on the last sentence of the excerpt. What does it mean that the view of history summed up here by the House of Justice underlies every one of our endeavors? In exploring this question, you may wish to identify a few of the differences you would expect to see between endeavors informed by the Bahá'í view of history and those undertaken with other conceptions in mind—for example, the view that history will end with the salvation of humankind and the arrival of the Kingdom of God on earth, or the many materialistic interpretations of history that deny the existence of a higher purpose revealed through the divine Manifestations, or the totally ahistorical way of thinking fostered by a consumer society that creates desire for immediate satisfaction. Write your thoughts in the space below.

_____

_____

Understanding that the processes of integration and disintegration are part of a greater plan should strengthen the determination of every individual to spare no effort to advance the aims of the global Plans given to us by the House of Justice. In this context, read the following words of the Guardian and discuss how in our endeavors at the grassroots of society we are aligning ourselves, individually and collectively, with forces associated with the process of integration:

> **"Far from yielding in their resolve, far from growing oblivious of their task, they should, at no time, however much buffeted by circumstances, forget that the synchronization of such world-shaking crises with the progressive unfoldment and fruition of their divinely appointed task is itself the work of Providence, the design of an inscrutable Wisdom, and the purpose of an all-compelling Will, a Will that directs and controls, in its own mysterious way, both the fortunes of the Faith and the destinies of men. Such simultaneous processes of rise and of fall, of integration and of disintegration, of order and chaos, with their continuous and reciprocal reactions on each other, are but aspects of a greater Plan, one and indivisible, whose Source is God, whose author is Bahá'u'lláh, the theater of whose operations is the entire planet, and whose ultimate objectives are the unity of the human race and the peace of all mankind."[2]**

## SECTION 3

Having summed up so concisely the Bahá'í view of history, the Universal House of Justice directs our attention to the principle of the oneness of humankind, "the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve". Of particular significance to our present inquiry is the plain acknowledgment, echoing the words of the Guardian, that the principle calls for a reconceptualization of the essential relationships which hold society together.

> **"As you know from your study of the Bahá'í writings, the principle that is to infuse all facets of organized life on the planet is the oneness of humankind, the hallmark of the age of maturity. That humanity constitutes a single people is a truth that, once viewed with skepticism, claims widespread acceptance today. The rejection of deeply ingrained prejudices and a growing sense of world citizenship are among the signs of this heightened awareness. Yet, however promising the rise in collective consciousness may be, it should be seen as only the first step of a process that will take decades—nay, centuries—to unfold. For the principle of the oneness of humankind, as proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh, asks not merely for cooperation**

**among people and nations. It calls for a complete reconceptualization of the relationships that sustain society. The deepening environmental crisis, driven by a system that condones the pillage of natural resources to satisfy an insatiable thirst for more, suggests how entirely inadequate is the present conception of humanity's relationship with nature; the deterioration of the home environment, with the accompanying rise in the systematic exploitation of women and children worldwide, makes clear how pervasive are the misbegotten notions that define relations within the family unit; the persistence of despotism, on the one hand, and the increasing disregard for authority, on the other, reveal how unsatisfactory to a maturing humanity is the current relationship between the individual and the institutions of society; the concentration of material wealth in the hands of a minority of the world's population gives an indication of how fundamentally ill-conceived are relationships among the many sectors of what is now an emerging global community. The principle of the oneness of humankind implies, then, an organic change in the very structure of society."[3]**

Awareness is growing everywhere of the interdependence of the nations and peoples of the world—this, despite the many setbacks that efforts aimed at strengthening ties of international cooperation have suffered in recent decades. Bahá'ís share in the belief that humanity is moving irresistibly towards an interconnected global community. Yet we recognize this process can only advance equitably and yield fruits that benefit the entire human race, if the essential relationships sustaining society are entirely transformed. This is by no means a conviction that is widely held by people and governments. Let us take an example that makes clear just how starkly different our vision is from so many others.

Most would agree that there are an increasing number of environmental problems that call for solutions at an international level and which will require a set of actions endorsed by all governments. But international agreements that do not deal with the ills of humanity at a fundamental level will fail to halt the current ecological crisis. Humanity's relationship with nature has to be redefined, and relations among human groups need to be reshaped. And the issue of national sovereignty must be seriously addressed. That the natural environment transcends man-made political and social boundaries is self-evident. Increased cooperation between nation-states is laudable in this respect. Yet, in the absence of a new set of relations among them, based on the principle of oneness, such cooperation can easily turn into polite negotiations where political and economic power dictates the outcome. What becomes globalized, then, are patterns of activity which perpetuate greed and dominance instead of a reciprocity that is the manifestation of the interconnectedness which governs the universe.

Of course the problems facing humanity at this time of transition are complex and admit no simple solutions. Still, the above example, however inadequate, shows how our thinking about global issues is influenced by our conviction that the essential relationships sustaining society must undergo profound change. Identify with the other participants in your group some of the flawed features that can generally be observed in the following relationships and discuss how they need to be completely reconceptualized in the light of the principle of the oneness of humankind:

a. Among family members: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

b. Between the individual and the institutions of society: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

c. Between the individual and the community: _____

_____

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d. Among nation-states of a global community: _____

_____

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## SECTION 4

After discussing the principle of the oneness of humankind and the change it calls for, the Universal House of Justice makes clear that "Bahá'ís do not believe the transformation thus envisioned will come about exclusively through their own efforts." "Every nation and every group—indeed, every individual—will, to a greater or lesser degree," the message explains, "contribute to the emergence of the world civilization towards which humanity is irresistibly moving." "Unity will progressively be achieved," as foreshadowed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "in different realms of social existence" and "the structures of a politically united world" will "gradually take shape." What the Bahá'í community has to consider at any given moment is "how it can best contribute to the civilization-building process as its resources increase." There are two dimensions to the community's contribution: "its own growth and development" and "its involvement in society at large". We will look at how the House of Justice describes the first dimension in this and the next couple of sections.

> **"Regarding the first, Bahá'ís across the globe, in the most unassuming settings, are striving to establish a pattern of activity and the corresponding administrative structures that embody the principle of the oneness of humankind and the convictions underpinning it, only a few of which are mentioned here as a means of illustration: that the rational soul has no gender, race, ethnicity or class, a fact that renders intolerable all forms of prejudice, not the least of which are those that prevent women from fulfilling their potential and engaging in various fields of endeavor shoulder to shoulder with men; that the root cause of prejudice is ignorance, which can be erased through educational processes that make knowledge accessible to the entire human race, ensuring it does not become the property of a privileged few; that science and religion are two complementary systems of knowledge and practice by which human beings come to understand the world**

**around them and through which civilization advances; that religion without science soon degenerates into superstition and fanaticism, while science without religion becomes the tool of crude materialism; that true prosperity, the fruit of a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual requirements of life, will recede further and further out of reach as long as consumerism continues to act as opium to the human soul; that justice, as a faculty of the soul, enables the individual to distinguish truth from falsehood and guides the investigation of reality, so essential if superstitious beliefs and outworn traditions that impede unity are to be eliminated; that, when appropriately brought to bear on social issues, justice is the single most important instrument for the establishment of unity; that work performed in the spirit of service to one's fellow human beings is a form of prayer, a means of worshipping God. Translating ideals such as these into reality, effecting a transformation at the level of the individual and laying the foundations of suitable social structures, is no small task, to be sure. Yet the Bahá'í community is dedicated to the long-term process of learning that this task entails, an enterprise in which increasing numbers from all walks of life, from every human group, are invited to take part."**[4]

You and the other members of your group are well acquainted with the pattern of activity to which the Universal House of Justice refers above: You are all familiar with the dynamics of efforts being undertaken to nurture the spiritual development of children, to channel the energies of junior youth, and to assist youth and adults in enhancing their capacity to apply the teachings to their individual and collective lives. You have also participated time and again in gatherings of collective worship and have visited many friends in their homes to engage in spiritually uplifting conversation. In light of this experience, your group may find it useful to discuss how the following convictions are expressed in the pattern of activity taking shape "in the most unassuming settings".

a. That the rational soul has no gender, race, ethnicity or class, a fact that renders intolerable all forms of prejudice, not the least of which are those that prevent women from fulfilling their potential and engaging in various fields of endeavor shoulder to shoulder with men

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b. That the root cause of prejudice is ignorance, which can be erased through educational processes that make knowledge accessible to the entire human race, ensuring it does not become the property of a privileged few

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c. That science and religion are two complementary systems of knowledge and practice by which human beings come to understand the world around them and through which civilization advances

d. That religion without science soon degenerates into superstition and fanaticism, while science without religion becomes the tool of crude materialism

e. That true prosperity, the fruit of a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual requirements of life, will recede further and further out of reach as long as consumerism continues to act as opium to the human soul

f. That justice, as a faculty of the soul, enables the individual to distinguish truth from falsehood and guides the investigation of reality, so essential if superstitious beliefs and outworn traditions that impede unity are to be eliminated

g. That, when appropriately brought to bear on social issues, justice is the single most important instrument for the establishment of unity

_____

_____

h. That work performed in the spirit of service to one's fellow human beings is a form of prayer, a means of worshipping God

_____

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Profound transformation takes place when the above convictions, underpinning the principle of the oneness of humankind, are not only manifested in the community's pattern of activity but also increasingly embodied in the corresponding administrative structures. Discuss some of the implications of this idea with the other members of your group.

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Now consider the long-term process of learning mentioned in the above excerpt, which we will examine further in the next few sections of this unit. Decide which characteristic in each of the pairs listed below will enable the learning process to advance (A) and which will retard its progress (R). Cite an example to illustrate your reasoning in each case.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| _____ Sporadic | _____ Continuous | _____ Focused |
| _____ Consistent | _____ Haphazard | _____ Dispersed |
| _____ Inefficient | _____ Consultative | _____ Clarifying |
| _____ Systematic | _____ Individual-centered | _____ Confusing |
| _____ Orderly | _____ Harmonious | _____ Disorganized |
| _____ Chaotic | _____ Contentious | _____ Methodical |

## SECTION 5

The Universal House of Justice goes on to explain:

> **"Numerous, of course, are the questions that the process of learning, now under way in all regions of the world, must address: how to bring people of different backgrounds together in an environment which, devoid of the constant threat of conflict and distinguished by its devotional character, encourages them to put aside the divisive ways of a partisan mindset, fosters higher degrees of unity of thought and action, and elicits wholehearted participation; how to administer the affairs of a community in which there is no ruling class with priestly functions that can lay claim to distinction or privilege; how to enable contingents of men and women to break free from the confines of passivity and the chains of oppression in order to engage in activities conducive to their spiritual, social and intellectual development; how to help youth navigate through a crucial stage of their lives and become empowered to direct their energies towards the advancement of civilization; how to create dynamics within the family unit that lead to material and spiritual prosperity without instilling in the rising generations feelings of estrangement towards an illusory 'other' or nurturing any instinct to exploit those relegated to this category; how to make it possible for decision making to benefit from a diversity of perspectives through a consultative process which, understood as the collective investigation of reality, promotes detachment from personal views, gives due importance to valid empirical information, does not raise mere opinion to the status of fact or define truth as the compromise between opposing interest groups. To explore questions such as these and the many others certain to arise, the Bahá'í community has adopted a mode of operation characterized by action, reflection, consultation and study—study which involves not only constant reference to the writings of the Faith but also the scientific analysis of patterns unfolding. Indeed, how to maintain such a mode of learning in action, how to ensure that growing numbers participate in the generation and application of relevant knowledge, and how to devise structures for the systemization of an expanding worldwide experience and for the equitable distribution of the lessons learned—these are, themselves, the object of regular examination.**
>
> **"The overall direction of the process of learning that the Bahá'í community is pursuing is guided by a series of global plans, the provisions of which are established by the Universal House of Justice. Capacity building is the watchword of these plans: they aim at enabling the protagonists of collective effort to strengthen the spiritual foundations of villages and neighborhoods, to address certain of their social and economic needs, and to contribute to the discourses prevalent in society, all while maintaining the necessary coherence in methods and approaches."[5]**

In the last paragraph, the House of Justice places the long-term process of learning in which we are engaged in the context of the series of global Plans that the Bahá'í community is pursuing under its guidance. These Plans, it states, are building our collective capacity "to strengthen the spiritual foundations of villages and neighborhoods, to address certain of their social and economic needs, and to contribute to the discourses prevalent in society, all while maintaining the necessary coherence in methods and approaches." As our capacity, at every stage in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan, increases, we will be able to apply with greater

efficacy the body of knowledge and insights that we have acquired to these three main areas of endeavor. The House of Justice enumerates some of the questions that this process of learning must address, questions to which we will return time and again in the subsequent courses in this sequence. For now, discuss with your group the experience and insights gained so far by your community with regard to the following two questions:

a. How to enable contingents of men and women to break free from the confines of passivity and the chains of oppression in order to engage in activities conducive to their spiritual, social, and intellectual development

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

b. How to maintain a robust mode of learning in action and how to ensure that growing numbers participate in the generation and application of knowledge

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## SECTION 6

The message continues by bringing into sharp focus a central question that the learning process in which the Bahá'í community is engaged must address: the nature of the relationships that must emerge among the individual, the community, and the institutions of society as humanity approaches its maturity.

> **"At the heart of the learning process is inquiry into the nature of the relationships that bind the individual, the community, and the institutions of society—actors on the stage of history who have been locked in a struggle for power throughout time. In this context, the assumption that relations among them will inevitably conform to the dictates of competition, a notion that ignores the extraordinary potential of the human spirit, has been set aside in favor of the more likely premise that their harmonious interactions can foster a civilization befitting a mature humanity. Animating the Bahá'í effort to discover the nature of a new set of relationships among these three protagonists is a vision of a future society that derives inspiration from the analogy drawn by Bahá'u'lláh, in a Tablet penned nearly a century and a half ago, which compares the world to the human body. Cooperation is the principle that governs the functioning of that system. Just as the appearance of the rational soul in this realm of existence is made possible through the complex association of countless cells, whose organization in tissues and**

**organs allows for the realization of distinctive capacities, so can civilization be seen as the outcome of a set of interactions among closely integrated, diverse components which have transcended the narrow purpose of tending to their own existence. And just as the viability of every cell and every organ is contingent upon the health of the body as a whole, so should the prosperity of every individual, every family, every people be sought in the well-being of the entire human race. In keeping with such a vision, institutions, appreciating the need for coordinated action channeled toward fruitful ends, aim not to control but to nurture and guide the individual, who, in turn, willingly receives guidance, not in blind obedience, but with faith founded on conscious knowledge. The community, meanwhile, takes on the challenge of sustaining an environment where the powers of individuals, who wish to exercise self-expression responsibly in accordance with the common weal and the plans of institutions, multiply in unified action.**

**"If the web of relationships alluded to above is to take shape and give rise to a pattern of life distinguished by adherence to the principle of the oneness of humankind, certain foundational concepts must be carefully examined. Most notable among them is the conception of power. Clearly the concept of power as a means of domination, with the accompanying notions of contest, contention, division and superiority, must be left behind. This is not to deny the operation of power; after all, even in cases where institutions of society have received their mandates through the consent of the people, power is involved in the exercise of authority. But political processes, like other processes of life, should not remain unaffected by the powers of the human spirit that the Bahá'í Faith—for that matter, every great religious tradition that has appeared throughout the ages—hopes to tap: the power of unity, of love, of humble service, of pure deeds. Associated with power in this sense are words such as 'release', 'encourage', 'channel', 'guide' and 'enable'. Power is not a finite entity which is to be 'seized' and 'jealously guarded'; it constitutes a limitless capacity to transform that resides in the human race as a body."[6]**

In the passage above, we are offered a glimpse into the nature of the relationships that will bind the individual, the community, and the institutions of society in the civilization Bahá'u'lláh envisions. Yet these relationships, which are to "give rise to a pattern of life distinguished by adherence to the principle of the oneness of humankind", will not develop if the current understanding of certain foundational concepts persists. Emphasis is placed in this regard on our conception of power. As part of your reflections on a conception of power suitable for a mature human race, you may wish to carry out the exercises that follow.

1. Complete the following sentences on the basis of the above passage:

   a. The assumption that relations among the individual, the community, and the institutions of society will inevitably conform to the dictates of competition is a notion that ignores _____ _____ .

   b. A more likely premise, one that underlies the endeavors of the Bahá'í community, is that their harmonious interactions can _____ _____ .

c. What animates the Bahá'í effort to discover the nature of a _____ _____ among them is a vision of a future society that derives inspiration from the analogy drawn by Bahá'u'lláh, which compares the _____ .

d. Cooperation is the principle that governs the functioning of the _____ of the human body.

e. The appearance of the rational soul in this realm of existence is made possible through _____ .

f. The organization of these cells in tissues and organs allows for _____ _____ .

g. The analogy of the human body enables us to view civilization in the same manner as the outcome of a set of _____ among _____ _____ , _____ which _____ _____ _____ .

h. The viability of every _____ and every _____ is contingent upon _____ .

i. Similarly, the prosperity of every _____ , every _____ , every _____ is dependent upon the _____ _____ .

j. In keeping with the vision of a future society that derives its inspiration from the analogy of the human body, institutions aim not _____ _____ .

k. The individual, in turn, _____ _____ _____ .

l. And the community takes on the challenges of _____ _____ _____ _____ .

2. Now describe with the other members of your group how the analogy of the human body enables us to envision the nature of a new set of relationships, relationships that are not tied to a conception of power rooted in domination, contest, division, and superiority.

3. The above passage refers to the powers of the human spirit as a limitless capacity that resides in the human race as a whole. Below are a number of such powers. Discuss in your group how each is indispensable to the efforts we exert to strengthen the spiritual foundations of villages and neighborhoods, thereby hastening the emergence of the civilization anticipated by Bahá'u'lláh.

   a. The power of understanding: _____

   b. The power of utterance: _____

   c. The power of obedience to the Covenant: _____

   d. The power of unity: _____

   e. The power of love: _____

   f. The power of pure deeds: _____

g. The power of humble service: _____

_____

_____

h. The power of the intellect: _____

_____

_____

4. Below are some of the verbs that we associate with power in the above sense. Utilize them to write sentences that describe the nature of the relationships that this conception of power would shape between any of the three protagonists in the advancement of civilization: the individual, the community, and the institutions.

Release: _____

_____

_____

Encourage: _____

_____

_____

Channel: _____

_____

_____

Guide: _____

_____

_____

Enable: _____

_____

_____

Trust: _____

_____

_____

Obey: _____

_____

_____

Nurture: _____

_____

_____

Accompany: _____

_____

_____

Harmonize: _____

_____

_____

## SECTION 7

Having described the nature of the learning process in which we are engaged, the Universal House of Justice goes on to address the second dimension of the community's contribution to advancing civilization:

> **"Within the framework traced out by the above ideas, then, it is possible to consider the second dimension of the Bahá'í community's efforts to contribute to the advancement of civilization: its involvement in society at large. Clearly what Bahá'ís see as one aspect of their contribution cannot contradict the other. They cannot be seeking to establish patterns of thought and action that give expression to the principle of oneness within their community, yet engage in activities in another context which, to whatever extent, reinforce an entirely different set of assumptions about social existence. To avoid such a duality, the Bahá'í community has progressively refined over time, on the basis of the teachings of the Faith, the main features of its participation in the life of society. First and foremost, Bahá'ís endeavor, whether as individuals or as a community, to put into practice the command of Bahá'u'lláh: 'They that are endued with sincerity and faithfulness should associate with all the peoples and kindreds of the earth with joy and radiance, inasmuch as consorting with people hath promoted and will continue to promote unity and concord, which in turn are conducive to the maintenance of order in the world and to the regeneration of nations.' It is through 'association and meeting', 'Abdu'l-Bahá has explained further, that 'we find happiness and development, individual and collective.' 'That which is conducive to association and attraction and unity among the sons of men', He has written in this connection, 'is the means of the life of the world of humanity, and whatever causeth division, repulsion and remoteness leadeth to the death of humankind.' Even in the case of religion, He has made it clear that it 'must be the cause of love and fellowship. Should religion become the cause of contention and enmity, its absence is preferable.' So it is that Bahá'ís do their utmost at all times to heed the counsel of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Shut your eyes to estrangement, then fix your gaze upon unity.' 'That one indeed is a man', He exhorts His followers, 'who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race.' 'Be anxiously concerned with the needs of the age ye live in,' is His admonition, 'and center your deliberations on its exigencies and requirements.' 'The supreme need of humanity is cooperation and reciprocity,' 'Abdu'l-Bahá has indicated. 'The stronger the ties of fellowship and solidarity amongst men, the greater will be the power of constructiveness and accomplishment in all the planes of human activity.' 'So powerful is the light of unity', Bahá'u'lláh declares, 'that it can illuminate the whole earth.'**

**"It is with such thoughts in mind that Bahá'ís enter into collaboration, as their resources permit, with an increasing number of movements, organizations, groups and individuals, establishing partnerships that strive to transform society and further the cause of unity, promote human welfare, and contribute to world solidarity. Indeed, the standard set by passages such as the above inspires the Bahá'í community to become actively engaged in as many aspects of contemporary life as feasible. In choosing areas of collaboration, Bahá'ís are to bear in mind the principle, enshrined in their teachings, that means should be consistent with ends; noble goals cannot be achieved through unworthy means. Specifically, it is not possible to build enduring unity through endeavors that require contention or assume that an inherent conflict of interests underlies all human interactions, however subtly. It should be noted here that, despite the limitations imposed by adherence to this principle, the community has not experienced a shortage of opportunities for collaboration; so many people in the world today are working intensely towards one or another aim which Bahá'ís share. In this respect, they also take care not to overstep certain bounds with their colleagues and associates. They are not to regard any joint undertaking as an occasion to impose religious convictions. Self-righteousness and other unfortunate manifestations of religious zeal are to be utterly avoided. Bahá'ís do, however, readily offer to their collaborators the lessons they have learned through their own experience, just as they are happy to incorporate into their community-building efforts insights gained through such association."**[7]

Discuss the following questions on the basis of the above paragraphs and write your thoughts in the spaces provided:

1. Can you describe the kind of duality that the Bahá'í community strives to avoid in pursuing the two dimensions of its efforts to contribute to the advancement of civilization?

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2. What are some of the themes found in the teachings of the Faith that define the main features of the community's participation in the life of society?

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3. What are some of the principles that should guide the collaboration of the Bahá'í community with like-minded groups and organizations?

4. Are you aware of any instances of collaboration in your own cluster or region that have brought forth worthy fruits? Can you describe one or two that are familiar to you?

## SECTION 8

Following the examination of concepts that inform the ongoing endeavor of the Bahá'í community, in its two broad dimensions, the message turns to the question of political activity:

**"This brings us, at last, to the specific question of political activity. The conviction of the Bahá'í community that humanity, having passed through earlier stages of social evolution, stands at the threshold of its collective maturity; its belief that the principle of the oneness of humankind, the hallmark of the age of maturity, implies a change in the very structure of society; its dedication to a learning process that, animated by this principle, explores the workings of a new set of relationships among the individual, the community and the institutions of society, the three protagonists in the advancement of civilization; its confidence that a revised conception of power, freed from the notion of dominance with the accompanying ideas of contest, contention, division and superiority, underlies the desired set of relationships; its commitment to a vision of a world that, benefiting from humanity's rich cultural diversity, abides no lines of separation—these all constitute essential elements of the framework that shapes the Bahá'í approach to politics set out in brief below.**

**"Bahá'ís do not seek political power. They will not accept political posts in their respective governments, whatever the particular system in place, though they will take up positions which they deem to be purely administrative in nature. They will not affiliate themselves with political parties, become entangled in partisan issues, or participate in programs tied to the divisive agendas of any group or faction. At the same time, Bahá'ís respect those who, out of a sincere desire to serve their countries, choose to pursue political aspirations or to engage in political activity. The approach adopted by the Bahá'í community of noninvolvement in such activity is not intended as a statement expressing some fundamental objection to politics in its true sense; indeed, humanity organizes itself through its political affairs. Bahá'ís vote in civil elections, as long as they do not have to identify themselves with any party in order to do so. In this connection, they view government as a system for maintaining the welfare and orderly progress of a society, and they undertake, one and all, to observe the laws of the land in which they reside, without allowing their inner religious beliefs to be violated. Bahá'ís will not be party to any instigation to overthrow a government. Nor will they interfere in political relations between the governments of different nations. This does not mean that they are naive about political processes in the world today and make no distinction between just and tyrannical rule. The rulers of the earth have sacred obligations to fulfill towards their people, who should be seen as the most precious treasure of any nation. Wherever they reside, Bahá'ís endeavor to uphold the standard of justice, addressing inequities directed towards themselves or towards others, but only through lawful means available to them, eschewing all forms of violent protest. Moreover, in no way does the love they hold in their hearts for humanity run counter to the sense of duty they feel to expend their energies in service to their respective countries.**

**"The approach, or strategy if you will, with the simple set of parameters outlined in the foregoing paragraph enables the community, in a world where nations and tribes are pitted one against the other and people are divided and separated by social structures, to maintain its cohesion and integrity as a global entity and to ensure that the activities of the Bahá'ís in one country do not jeopardize the existence of those elsewhere. Guarded against competing interests of nations and political parties, the Bahá'í community is thus able to build its capacity to contribute to processes that promote peace and unity."[8]**

The first paragraph above summarizes the main elements of the framework that shapes the Bahá'í approach to politics—elements which are described earlier in the message. What are they?

In our lives, we encounter many who are convinced of the absolute necessity of partisan political activity for the promotion of well-being and freedom from oppression. Even when impressed by the ideals of the Faith and sincerely working for the betterment of the world, they may find it difficult to accept our refusal to participate in partisan politics. Imagine you have met one such friend and write a paragraph, on the basis of the passage above, that explains why you have adopted such a position.

From your study of Book 8 and the ideas you have considered so far in this unit, you must be able to describe some of the features of social organization that politics in its true sense should embody as humanity approaches its stage of maturity. Discuss some of them with your fellow participants in this course.

## SECTION 9

The Universal House of Justice ends its 2 March 2013 message to the Bahá'ís of Iran with the following words:

> **"Dear Friends: We recognize that treading this path, which you have done so ably for decades, is not without its challenges. It asks for an integrity that cannot be shaken, for a rectitude of conduct that cannot be undermined, for a clarity of thought that cannot be obscured, for a love of one's country that cannot be manipulated. Now that your fellow citizens understand your plight, and possibilities will no doubt open for you to participate even further in the life of society, we pray that you will be assisted from on High in explaining to your friends and compatriots the framework articulated in these pages so that, in collaboration with them, you will find increasing opportunities to labor for the good of your people without compromising, in any way, your identity as followers of One Who summoned humanity, more than a century ago, to a new World Order."[9]**

That treading the path described by the House of Justice presents a challenge to the Bahá'í community—not only to those of us who live under persecution but also to those who strive to serve humankind in conditions of relative liberty—is abundantly clear. It asks of all of us "an integrity that cannot be shaken," "a rectitude of conduct that cannot be undermined," and "a clarity of thought that cannot be obscured". Our study of its guidance over the past several sections has already lent us a great deal of clarity. In its description of the two complementary dimensions of our work to contribute to the advancement of civilization—the growth and development of the Bahá'í community and its involvement in the life of society—we have come to appreciate even further the importance of devoting our energies to the provisions of the global Plans of the Faith. It is in this context, then, that we will be seeking to answer in the sections that follow the question: What are some of the salient features of the approach we are taking to respond to the demands of the sacred enterprise in which we are engaged?

## SECTION 10

As we try to answer the question before us, we should remind ourselves that our endeavors are manifestations of love and, as we have discussed repeatedly in the courses of this sequence, the word is not being employed lightly. This love is not one of the many passions to which the human heart is prone; it is the love for God and His Manifestation from which flows a generous, patient, sincere love for humanity. About this powerful force, the Universal House of Justice writes at the conclusion of its Riḍván 2010 message:

> **"Dear Friends: How often did the Beloved Master express the hope that the hearts of the believers would overflow with love for one another, that they would abide no lines of separation but would regard all of humanity even as one family. 'See ye no strangers,' is His exhortation; 'rather see all men as friends, for love and unity come hard when ye fix your gaze on otherness.' All of the developments examined in the preceding pages are, at the most profound level, but an expression of universal love achieved through the power of the Holy Spirit. For is it not love for God that burns away all veils of estrangement and division and binds hearts**

**together in perfect unity? Is it not His love that spurs you on in the field of service and enables you to see in every soul the capacity to know Him and to worship Him? Are you not galvanized by the knowledge that His Manifestation gladly endured a life of suffering out of His love for humanity?"[10]**

## SECTION 11

A feature that distinguishes our approach to the work of the Cause is the posture we assume towards the messages we receive from the Universal House of Justice—a posture arising from an ever-growing consciousness of the vital necessity of its direction and guidance. This, of course, was the central theme of the third unit of Book 8. Here it is important to once again reflect on how the Universal House of Justice as Head of the Faith steers the unfoldment of the Divine Plan through a series of global Plans. The following quotations speak to this point:

**". . . the Bahá'í community as a whole is advancing in a direction that has been set by the Universal House of Justice as Head of the Faith. The thrust created by the response of individual believers to its guidance, as their powers are multiplied in unified action, propels the community closer and closer to the civilization conceived by Bahá'u'lláh."[11]**

**". . . at every stage in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan, the Center of Authority in the Faith establishes a framework for action to guide the believers in a united effort to apply Bahá'u'lláh's teachings for the progress of the Bahá'í community and the building of a world civilization."[12]**

**"Central to the effort to advance the work of expansion and consolidation, social action, and the involvement in the discourses of society is the notion of an evolving conceptual framework, a matrix that organizes thought and gives shape to activities and which becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates."[13]**

The passage below, with which you are familiar from your study of Book 8, gives further insight into the nature of the framework for action defined by the global Plans.

**"What the friends need to remember in this respect is that, in their efforts to achieve personal growth and to uphold Bahá'í ideals, they are not isolated individuals, withstanding alone the onslaught of the forces of moral decay operating in society. They are members of a purposeful community, global in scope, pursuing a bold spiritual mission—working to establish a pattern of activity and administrative structures suited to a humanity entering its age of maturity. Giving shape to the community's efforts is a framework for action defined by the global Plans of the Faith. This framework promotes the transformation of the individual in conjunction with social transformation, as two inseparable processes. Specifically, the courses of the institute are intended to set the individual on a path in which qualities and attitudes, skills and abilities, are gradually acquired through service—service intended to quell the insistent self, helping to lift the individual out of its confines and placing him or her in a dynamic process of community building."[14]**

And the Riḍván message of 2021 from the Universal House of Justice, written upon the conclusion of a series of Plans covering a period of twenty-five years, states the following:

> **"As the efforts of the friends intensified, various principles, concepts and strategies of universal relevance to the growth process began to crystallize into a framework for action that could evolve to accommodate new elements. This framework proved fundamental to the release of tremendous vitality. It assisted the friends to channel their energies in ways that, experience had shown, were conducive to the growth of healthy communities. But a framework is not a formula. By taking into account the various elements of the framework when assessing the reality of a cluster, a locality, or simply a neighborhood, a pattern of activity could be developed that drew on what the rest of the Bahá'í world was learning while still being a response to the particulars of that place. A dichotomy between rigid requirements on the one hand and limitless personal preferences on the other gave way to a more nuanced understanding of the variety of means by which individuals could support a process that, at its heart, was coherent and continually being refined as experience accumulated. Let there be no doubt about the advance represented by the emergence of this framework: the implications for harmonizing and unifying the endeavors of the entire Bahá'í world and propelling its onward march were of great consequence."**[15]

As we respond to the guidance of the House of Justice and arise to meet the challenges of each global Plan, progress is achieved and the way opened for the next stage in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan. Among the most notable achievements are the advances made at the level of culture, to which every individual laboring in the field of service contributes. Below are listed some of the qualities, habits, attitudes, and abilities that the institute courses are helping us to develop. Add a few others and discuss with your group how they are gradually transforming the culture of the community in which you and your friends are serving.

- To continually turn to the writings in search of insights
- To rely on divine confirmations in carrying out our efforts
- To derive joy from the act of service itself
- To strive towards purity in thought and action
- To abandon the desire for recognition and praise
- To seek the good-pleasure of the Lord
- To be ever aware of the sacredness of our task
- To contribute to unity of thought and action
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

The House of Justice warns us that the framework for action described in its messages is not a formula. How do we ensure that, in our efforts to achieve progress, we do not turn it into one? Write your thoughts in the space below.

## SECTION 12

The Guardian tells us that the Faith is scientific in its method. We should consider how this principle expresses itself in the activity of the Bahá'í world today. To this end, let us think about the nature of our mode of operation, specifically what it means to be in a learning mode. Within the parameters of the framework provided by the Universal House of Justice, we act, reflect on our actions, consult and study and, in so doing, we learn how to apply Bahá'u'lláh's teachings to the material and spiritual progress of our neighborhoods, villages, towns, and cities. Our mode of operation is one of learning in action. A letter written on behalf of the House of Justice reminds us that

> **"the challenge for the friends everywhere is to study the guidance issued by the House of Justice, on the one hand, and to learn from experience as they strive to put that guidance into practice, on the other."[16]**

And in another message, we read:

> **"Each of the various elements that form part of the framework of this series of Plans evolves through a process of learning guided by the decisions of the Universal House of Justice . . ."[17]**

The implications of the mode of operation we are called upon to maintain are many. We understand that learning cannot occur without consistent effort. Systematic action has primacy; both excessive theoretical discussion and "spasmodic, uncoordinated exertions" are avoided. We are called upon to be "clearheaded, methodical, efficient, constant, balanced and harmonious" in our work. Insights about a given question or process emerge out of reflection on action. Action and reflection are not undertaken in isolation from each other. They are inseparable parts of a single process. Study "involves not only constant reference to the writings of the Faith but also the scientific analysis of patterns unfolding." We reach unity of thought through consultation. We make decisions, often about short-term goals and the next steps to be taken, in such a way that we continually build upon previous achievements, avoiding the tendency to follow the emotions of the moment, to look for shortcuts, or to construct formulas. Although focusing on immediate action, we never lose sight of the long-term vision of the civilization conceived by Bahá'u'lláh. And what is essential to recognize is that this process of action, reflection, consultation, and study is not meant for a few. Its goal is to enable an ever-increasing number of people to achieve spiritual and material progress through the application of the teachings.

> **"The friends who participate in these intensive programs of growth should bear in mind that the purpose is to ensure that the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh reaches the masses of humanity and enables them to achieve spiritual and material progress through the application of the Teachings. Vast numbers among the peoples of the world are ready, indeed yearn, for the bounties that Bahá'u'lláh alone can bestow upon them once they have committed themselves to building the new society He has envisioned. In learning to systematize their large-scale teaching work, Bahá'í communities are becoming better equipped to respond to this longing. They cannot withhold whatever effort, whatever sacrifice, may be called for."[18]**

Consider the context in which you are carrying out your efforts to engage an increasing number of people in community-building endeavors. How are the following features expressed in the approach you and the friends in whose company you act have adopted?

a. Consistency of effort

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b. Systematization of effort that avoids both excessive theoretical discussion and spasmodic, uncoordinated exertions

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c. Emergence of insights through the interplay between action and reflection

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d. Study that involves not only constant reference to the writings of the Faith but also the scientific analysis of patterns unfolding

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e. Consultation as a means for reaching unity of thought

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f. Identification of short-term goals that always build upon previous achievements

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g. Avoidance of the tendency to act on the emotions of the moment, to look for shortcuts, or to construct formulas

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h. Focus on immediate achievable action, without losing sight of the long-term vision of the civilization conceived by Bahá'u'lláh

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i. Engagement of an increasing number of people in the study and application of the teachings to achieve spiritual and material progress

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It is commonplace today for words and phrases, even those that are rich with meaning, to be turned into slogans and reduced to empty forms. Clearly, guided by the institutions of the Faith, we are watchful not to allow our use of the phrase "learning mode" to suffer such a fate. You may wish to think with the other members of your group about how striving to be "clearheaded, methodical, efficient, constant, balanced and harmonious" can help ensure that the learning process in which we are engaged does not become mechanical or superficial.

## SECTION 13

There are, you will recall from your study of the third unit of Book 8, certain "habits of thought that affect the unfoldment of the global Plan" which we should seek to develop as we engage in a learning process. There are also tendencies that need to be gradually overcome, many of which "are reinforced by approaches prevalent in society at large". We are aware, in this connection, that systematic learning cannot occur if action is limited to isolated events. Our ability to think in terms of process is essential, as is made clear in the passage below, already familiar to you from that unit.

> **"Finally, a significant advance in culture, one which we have followed with particular interest, is marked by the rise in capacity to think in terms of process. That, from the outset, the believers have been asked to be ever conscious of the broad processes that define their work is apparent from a careful reading of even the earliest communications of the Guardian related to the first national plans of the Faith. However, in a world focused increasingly on the promotion of events, or at best projects, with a mindset that derives satisfaction from the sense of expectation and excitement they generate, maintaining the level of dedication required for long-term action demands considerable effort. The expansion and consolidation of the Bahá'í community encompasses a number of interacting processes, each of which contributes its share to the movement of humanity towards Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a new World Order. The lines of action associated with any given process provide for the organization of occasional events, and from time to time, activities take the shape of a project with a clear beginning and a**

**definite end. If, however, events are imposed on the natural unfoldment of a process, they will disrupt its sound evolution. If the projects undertaken in a cluster are not made subordinate to the explicit needs of the processes unfolding there, they will yield little fruit."[19]**

Call to mind some of the events in which you took part during the past few cycles of activity in the cluster you serve, and carry out the exercises below.

a. Mention one or two of these events.

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b. How did they contribute to the sound evolution of the community-building process in which you are engaged?

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c. Give examples, too, of events that would have interfered with the natural evolution of this process.

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d. Now write a paragraph or two about how thinking in terms of process is helping the friends in the cluster where you live to operate in a learning mode.

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## SECTION 14

Closely tied to our intention to think and act in a learning mode is the emphasis placed in all our undertakings on capacity building, to which the Universal House of Justice refers as the "watchword" of our global Plans. In a message dated 26 December 1995 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, the House of Justice makes clear that "systematic attention has to be given by Bahá'í institutions to training a significant number of believers and assisting them in serving the Cause according to their God-given talents and capacities." In that same message, as you will remember from your study of the third unit of Book 8, it calls for the establishment of training institutes throughout the world:

> **"The development of human resources on a large scale requires that the establishment of institutes be viewed in a new light. In many regions, it has become imperative to create institutes as organizational structures dedicated to systematic training. The purpose of such training is to endow ever-growing contingents of believers with the spiritual insights, the knowledge, and the skills needed to carry out the many tasks of accelerated expansion and consolidation, including the teaching and deepening of a large number of people—adults, youth and children. This purpose can best be achieved through well-organized, formal programs consisting of courses that follow appropriately designed curricula."[20]**

The Riḍván 2010 message of the House of Justice comments, then, on the insights gained over fifteen years of effort to develop the human resources of the community:

> **"When in December 1995 we called for the establishment of training institutes worldwide, the pattern most prevalent in the Bahá'í community for helping individual believers to deepen their knowledge of the Faith consisted principally of occasional courses and classes, of varying durations, addressing a variety of subjects. That pattern had satisfied well the needs of an emerging worldwide Bahá'í community, still relatively few in number and concerned chiefly with its geographic spread across the globe. We made clear at the time, however, that**

**another approach to the study of the writings would have to take shape, one that would spur large numbers into the field of action, if the process of entry by troops was to accelerate appreciably. In this connection, we asked that training institutes assist ever-growing contingents of believers in serving the Cause through the provision of courses that would impart the knowledge, insights and skills required to carry out the many tasks associated with accelerated expansion and consolidation.**

**"To read the writings of the Faith and to strive to obtain a more adequate understanding of the significance of Bahá'u'lláh's stupendous Revelation are obligations laid on every one of His followers. All are enjoined to delve into the ocean of His Revelation and to partake, in keeping with their capacities and inclinations, of the pearls of wisdom that lie therein. In this light, local deepening classes, winter and summer schools, and specially arranged gatherings in which individual believers knowledgeable in the writings were able to share with others insights into specific subjects emerged naturally as prominent features of Bahá'í life. Just as the habit of daily reading will remain an integral part of Bahá'í identity, so will these forms of study continue to hold a place in the collective life of the community. But understanding the implications of the Revelation, both in terms of individual growth and social progress, increases manifold when study and service are joined and carried out concurrently. There, in the field of service, knowledge is tested, questions arise out of practice, and new levels of understanding are achieved. In the system of distance education that has now been established in country after country—the principal elements of which include the study circle, the tutor and the curriculum of the Ruhi Institute—the worldwide Bahá'í community has acquired the capacity to enable thousands, nay millions, to study the writings in small groups with the explicit purpose of translating the Bahá'í teachings into reality, carrying the work of the Faith forward into its next stage: sustained large-scale expansion and consolidation.**

**"Let no one fail to appreciate the possibilities thus created. 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 skillful at appealing to superficial emotions. Even in many educational systems students are treated as though they were receptacles designed to receive information. That the Bahá'í world has succeeded in developing a culture which promotes a way of thinking, studying, and acting, in which all consider themselves as treading a common path of service—supporting one another and advancing together, respectful of the knowledge that each one possesses at any given moment and avoiding the tendency to divide the believers into categories such as deepened and uninformed—is an accomplishment of enormous proportions. And therein lie the dynamics of an irrepressible movement."[21]**

And, in its 30 December 2021 message to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, the House of Justice writes:

**"The importance of education to a Bahá'í conception of spiritual and social transformation can hardly be overestimated. 'Consider', Bahá'u'lláh states, 'the revelation of the light of the Name of God, the Educator. Behold, how in all things the evidences of such a revelation are manifest, how the betterment of all beings**

**dependeth upon it.' The significance of education in the work of community building is unmistakable, and in the field of social action the provision of education remains the signature contribution of Bahá'ís in most parts of the world. Preeminent among the structures and agencies created by the Bahá'í world to offer education is, of course, the training institute. Indeed, the network of national and regional training institutes operating with such proficiency around the globe is among the choicest fruits of the previous series of global Plans. Building capacity for service within communities by enabling ever-increasing numbers of individuals to benefit from the institute process will continue to be a central feature of the Plans in the present series. The capacity for community development that has already emerged, represented by hundreds of thousands of individuals who are able to serve as tutors, animators, or children's class teachers, is a resource of historic consequence."**[22]

It is apparent that the process of capacity building, to which you have given considerable attention in your study of previous courses in this sequence, especially Book 7, is distinct from the kinds of training that are limited to the assimilation of information, the mastery of techniques, or the attainment of a degree of proficiency in a set of procedures. Capacity building, for us, involves the development of spiritual qualities, a continual advance in understanding, and the acquisition of knowledge, attitudes and skills—all centered on service to humanity. In this regard, it may be worthwhile for you to consider how the institute process enhances our capacity to

- build unity
- promote justice
- participate effectively in consultation
- oppose lower passions and turn towards a higher purpose
- face challenges with wisdom and determination
- make of obstacles stepping stones for further progress
- learn and act systematically
- bring to all endeavors breadth of vision and clarity of thought, flexibility and resourcefulness
- engage in meaningful and distinctive conversations

You may wish to add a few more to the list:

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

## SECTION 15

When we think of capacity building as a feature fundamental to our approach, it is important to remember that training alone does not necessarily raise the capacity of an individual for sustained service to the Cause and humanity. For the fruits of training to be reaped, we must support and encourage one another at every step of the way. The concept of a path of service, so central to the institute process, assumes that those treading it are accompanying one another, a theme that we will examine in some depth in Book 10. For the purpose of our discussion here, reflect on the following passage in which the Universal House of Justice explains:

> **"Of course, it is not the provision of training by itself that brings about progress. Efforts to build capacity fall short if arrangements are not swiftly made to accompany individuals into the arena of service. An adequate level of support extends far beyond encouraging words. When preparing to take on an unfamiliar task, working alongside a person with some experience increases consciousness of what is possible. An assurance of practical help can give a tentative venturer the courage to initiate an activity for the first time. Souls then advance their understanding together, humbly sharing the insights each possesses at a given moment and eagerly seeking to learn from fellow wayfarers on the path of service. Hesitation recedes and capacity develops to the point where an individual can carry out activities independently and, in turn, accompany others on the same path."[23]**

It is often said that competition is the force driving progress, motivating people to achieve excellence. How does the experience of the Bahá'í community refute this claim? What are the social and ecological consequences of giving the competitive spirit dominance as a main driver of progress?

Clearly, the experience of the Bahá'í community demonstrates that excellence is being achieved through the efforts of growing numbers of people walking together on a path of service without the slightest manifestation of the spirit of competition. Can you mention, from what you have observed in your own village or neighborhood, some of the attributes that most

distinguish relationships among those who walk this path? How do these attributes contribute both to excellence and to individual and collective progress?

## SECTION 16

The concept of capacity does not, of course, pertain to the realm of the individual only. That our endeavors seek to develop capacity concurrently in individuals, communities, and institutions—the three inseparable participants in the construction of a new World Order—is paramount to the way we think and act. The following quotation written on behalf of the Guardian, with which you are already familiar, speaks to the relationship that exists between individuals and the world around them and demonstrates how ineffective it would be to focus on the progress of only one of the protagonists:

> **"We cannot segregate the human heart from the environment outside us and say that once one of these is reformed everything will be improved. Man is organic with the world. His inner life molds the environment and is itself also deeply affected by it. The one acts upon the other and every abiding change in the life of man is the result of these mutual reactions."**[24]

In the previous two sections, we examined how the capacity of the individual is being enhanced through participation in the institute process. Similarly, the Bahá'í community as a whole is learning to apply Bahá'u'lláh's healing remedy to achieve profound and lasting change. It is increasingly serving as an environment of mutual support and encouragement, an

environment in which the capacities of all components—men, women, youth, and children—are developed and their powers multiplied in unified action. In this context, you may wish to discuss in your group how a growing understanding of concepts explored time and again in this sequence of courses, complemented by an increasing appreciation for the spiritual qualities, attitudes and habits it fosters, helps us create the requisite environment in our communities. A few such concepts and attributes are mentioned below, and you are encouraged to add others to the list.

- The utter necessity of relying on the power of divine assistance
- The importance of focused and sacrificial effort
- The dynamics of effort and divine confirmation
- The need to put aside personal likes and dislikes in collective endeavor
- The spiritual discipline to resist the promptings of the insistent self
- The interdependence of individual initiative and collective action
- The absolute necessity of aligning one's thinking with the writings of the Faith
- The joy derived from witnessing the progress of others
- The privilege of accompanying one another on the path of service
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

## SECTION 17

Regarding the development of institutional capacity, this, too, is a concern central to all of our endeavors. As the institutions of a new World Order develop and mature, we witness patterns of interaction emerge that are befitting a humanity coming of age. The following words of the Guardian need to be always kept in mind:

> **"Few will fail to recognize that the Spirit breathed by Bahá'u'lláh upon the world, and which is manifesting itself with varying degrees of intensity through the efforts consciously displayed by His avowed supporters and indirectly through certain humanitarian organizations, can never permeate and exercise an abiding influence upon mankind unless and until it incarnates itself in a visible Order, which would bear His name, wholly identify itself with His principles, and function in conformity with His laws. . . .**
>
> **"For Bahá'u'lláh, we should readily recognize, has not only imbued mankind with a new and regenerating Spirit. He has not merely enunciated certain universal principles, or propounded a particular philosophy, however potent, sound and universal these may be. In addition to these He, as well as 'Abdu'l-Bahá after Him, has, unlike the Dispensations of the past, clearly and specifically laid down a set of Laws, established definite institutions, and provided for the essentials of a**

**Divine Economy. These are destined to be a pattern for future society, a supreme instrument for the establishment of the Most Great Peace, and the one agency for the unification of the world, and the proclamation of the reign of righteousness and justice upon the earth."[25]**

Highlighting the progress made in previous global Plans and making reference to future developments, the Universal House of Justice writes the following about the institutions of the Faith in its Riḍván 2010 message:

**"Not only does this advance in culture influence relations among individuals, but its effects can also be felt in the conduct of the administrative affairs of the Faith. As learning has come to distinguish the community's mode of operation, certain aspects of decision making related to expansion and consolidation have been assigned to the body of the believers, enabling planning and implementation to become more responsive to circumstances on the ground. Specifically, a space has been created, in the agency of the reflection meeting, for those engaged in activities at the cluster level to assemble from time to time in order to reach consensus on the current status of their situation, in light of experience and guidance from the institutions, and to determine their immediate steps forward. A similar space is opened by the institute, which makes provision for those serving as tutors, children's class teachers, and animators of junior youth groups in a cluster to meet severally and consult on their experience. Intimately connected to this grassroots consultative process are the agencies of the training institute and the Area Teaching Committee, together with the Auxiliary Board members, whose joint interactions provide another space in which decisions pertaining to growth are taken, in this case with a higher degree of formality. The workings of this cluster-level system, born of exigencies, point to an important characteristic of Bahá'í administration: Even as a living organism, it has coded within it the capacity to accommodate higher and higher degrees of complexity, in terms of structures and processes, relationships and activities, as it evolves under the guidance of the Universal House of Justice.**

**"That the institutions of the Faith at all levels—from the local and the regional, to the national and the continental—are able to manage such growing complexity with greater and greater dexterity is both a sign and a necessity of their steady maturation. Evolving relationships among administrative structures have brought the Local Spiritual Assembly to the threshold of a new stage in the exercise of its responsibilities to diffuse the Word of God, to mobilize the energies of the believers, and to forge an environment that is spiritually edifying. On previous occasions we have explained that the maturity of a Spiritual Assembly cannot be assessed by the regularity of its meetings and the efficiency of its functioning alone. Rather its strength must be measured, to a large extent, by the vitality of the spiritual and social life of the community it serves—a growing community that welcomes the constructive contributions of both those who are formally enrolled and those who are not. It is gratifying to see that current approaches, methods and instruments are providing the means for Local Spiritual Assemblies, even those newly formed, to fulfill these responsibilities as they set about to ensure that the requirements of the Five Year Plan are adequately met in their localities. Indeed, the Assembly's proper involvement with the Plan**

**becomes crucial to every attempt to embrace large numbers—itself a requisite for the manifestation of the full range of its powers and capacities.**

**"The development that we are sure to witness in Local Spiritual Assemblies over the next several years is made possible by the growing strength of National Spiritual Assemblies, whose ability to think and act strategically has risen perceptibly, especially as they have learned to analyze the community-building process at the grassroots with increasing acuity and effectiveness and to inject into it, as needed, assistance, resources, encouragement, and loving guidance. In countries where conditions demand it, they have devolved a number of their responsibilities in this respect to Regional Councils, decentralizing certain administrative functions, enhancing institutional capacity in areas under their jurisdiction, and fostering more sophisticated sets of interactions. It is no exaggeration to say that the full engagement of National Assemblies was instrumental in creating the final thrust required to attain the goal of the current Plan, and we expect to see further developments in this direction as, in concert with the Counsellors, they exert in the course of the critical, fleeting months ahead a supreme effort to ready their communities to embark on the next five-year enterprise.**

**"Without question, the evolution of the institution of the Counsellors constitutes one of the most significant advances in the Bahá'í Administrative Order during the past decade. That institution had already made extraordinary leaps in its development when, in January 2001, the Counsellors and the Auxiliary Board members gathered in the Holy Land for the conference marking the occupation by the International Teaching Centre of its permanent seat on Mount Carmel. There is no doubt that the energies released by that event have propelled the institution rapidly forward. The degree of influence the Counsellors and their auxiliaries have exerted on the progress of the Plan demonstrates that they have assumed their natural place in the forefront of the teaching field. We are confident that the coming year will bind the institutions of the Administrative Order further together in collaboration, as all strive to reinforce, each in accordance with its evolving functions and responsibilities, the mode of learning that has become a prominent feature of the community's functioning—this, most urgently in those clusters experiencing intensive programs of growth."[26]**

You and the other members of your study group no doubt possess a certain degree of administrative experience among you. Meanwhile, your participation in the community-building process in the cluster where you reside makes you well familiar with the efforts of the training institute, the Area Teaching Committee, and probably one or more Local Spiritual Assemblies. With this knowledge and experience in mind, give some examples that show how each of the following dimensions of institutional capacity is being manifested:

- How bonds of love are being strengthened
- How the manifold talents and abilities with which the community is endowed are being utilized
- How the welfare of the entire population in the village, town or neighborhood is being promoted
- How unity of thought on the nature and direction of Bahá'í activity is being nurtured within the community

- How the community's awareness of the privilege of making effort to realize Bahá'u'lláh's purpose is being raised and an ever-present sense of joy cultivated thereby
- How human resources are being mobilized
- How the diversity of aspirations, talents, and activities of individuals are being integrated into one forward movement
- How the friends are being helped to maintain focus on the aims established by the House of Justice at each stage of the Divine Plan
- How unity in action is being fostered
- How a spirit of service and collaboration is being reinforced among the members of the community

Let us conclude our brief discussion of what capacity building entails in relation to the individual, the community, and the institutions of the Faith by reading the following passage from the 30 December 2021 message of the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors. In it, the House of Justice refers to the "series of global Plans" that will "carry the ark of the Cause into the third century of the Bahá'í Era and conclude at Riḍván 2046."

> **"During this period, the Bahá'í world will be focused on a single aim: the release of the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures. The pursuit of this overall aim will require a further rise in the capacity of the individual believer, the local community, and the institutions of the Faith. These three constant protagonists of the Plan each have a part to play, and each one has capacities and qualities that must be developed. However, each is incapable of manifesting its full potential on its own. It is by strengthening their dynamic relationships with one another that their powers are combined and multiplied. 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that the more the qualities of cooperation and mutual assistance are manifested by a people, 'the more will human society advance in progress and prosperity'; in the Faith, this principle distinguishes and shapes the interactions of individuals, institutions, and communities, and it endows the body of the Cause with moral vigor and spiritual health."[27]**

## SECTION 18

To bring about the transformation envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh in the life of humanity requires a level of commitment that engenders intensity of action. Every task before us receives the appropriate degree of attention and is carried out with unswerving determination. We give to every undertaking the time and energy it demands, and we do so with vigor and passion. The following words of Bahá'u'lláh in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas resonate in our minds and hearts:

> **"This is not a Cause which may be made a plaything for your idle fancies, nor is it a field for the foolish and faint of heart. By God, this is the arena of insight and detachment, of vision and upliftment, where none may spur on their chargers save the valiant horsemen of the Merciful, who have severed all attachment to the**

**world of being. These, truly, are they that render God victorious on earth, and are the dawning-places of His sovereign might amidst mankind."[28]**

And the appeal below made decades ago by the Guardian, in which he reminds the friends of the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá expressing His wish for them to forgo rest and arise to serve the Cause, still stirs us to action.

**"Having grasped the significance of these words, having obtained a clear understanding of the true character of our mission, the methods to adopt, the course to pursue, and having attained sufficiently the individual regeneration—the essential requisite of teaching—let us arise to teach His Cause with righteousness, conviction, understanding and vigor. Let this be the paramount and most urgent duty of every Bahá'í. Let us make it the dominating passion of our life."[29]**

In the Riḍván 2015 message from the Universal House of Justice we read:

**"Yet there is reassurance in the knowledge that, amidst the disintegration, a new kind of collective life is taking shape which gives practical expression to all that is heavenly in human beings. We have observed how, especially in those places where intensity in teaching and community-building activities has been maintained, the friends have been able to guard themselves against the forces of materialism that risk sapping their precious energies. Not only that, but in managing the various other calls upon their time, they never lose sight of the sacred and pressing tasks before them. Such attentiveness to the needs of the Faith and to humanity's best interests is required in every community."[30]**

Discuss in your group how intensity of action—a characteristic so essential to all our efforts to serve the Cause and humanity—protects the individual, the community, and its institutions from the forces of materialism. Write some of the conclusions reached in the space below.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

## SECTION 19

Another feature indispensable to the approach we take to effect change, alongside intensity of action, is continuity of action. We are acutely aware of the intricate relationship between continuity and change. We are builders engaged in a process of action and reflection that is methodical, avoids freneticism, and adheres closely to the guidance of the Universal House of Justice. Each activity is established with care and nurtured to fruition. New lines of action organically emerge from existing ones and are pursued according to our increased capacity. When obstacles arise, the way to overcome them is persistently sought. We make gradual adjustments to our methods, in keeping with the lessons we learn, but in a way that continuity of action is maintained. We create strength and build upon it. The passages below written by the Universal House of Justice offer us insight into this matter.

In a message dated 27 December 2005 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, the House of Justice explains:

> **"One of your primary concerns will be to strengthen appreciation for systematic action, already heightened by the successes it has brought. To arrive at a unified vision of growth based on a realistic assessment of possibilities and resources, to develop strategies that lend structure to it, to devise and implement plans of action commensurate with capacity, to make necessary adjustments while maintaining continuity, to build on accomplishments—these are some of the requisites of systematization that every community must learn and internalize."[31]**

In its statement *The Institution of the Counsellors*, the House of Justice writes:

> **"If learning is to be the primary mode of operation in a community, then visions, strategies, goals and methods have to be reexamined time and again. As tasks are accomplished, obstacles removed, resources multiplied and lessons learned, modifications have to be made in goals and approaches, but in a way that continuity of action is maintained."[32]**

In a message dated 28 December 2010 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, the House of Justice describes further:

> **"To this end, you and your auxiliaries will need to cultivate an atmosphere that encourages the friends to be methodical but not rigid, creative but not haphazard, decisive but not hasty, careful but not controlling, recognizing that, in the final analysis, it is not technique but unity of thought, consistent action, and dedication to learning which will bring about progress."[33]**

And the Riḍván 2015 message from the House of Justice indicates:

> **"Change in a cluster, be it swift or hard won, flows neither from a formulaic approach nor from random activity; it proceeds to the rhythm of action, reflection, and consultation, and is propelled by plans that are the fruit of experience."**[34]

Below are some situations that can present themselves in a cluster. Which would be consistent with the idea of creating strength and building upon it? Explain why or why not.

- A young couple moved to our community and quickly formed close friendships with several families in the neighborhood where they settled. Soon, they established a class for the spiritual education of children and, after some time, a study circle for a few parents. This brought the number of core activities in our neighborhood to five, since a junior youth group, a study circle with youth, and a devotional gathering were already being sustained. About a year later, five of the older children turned 12 and invited several of their friends to form a new junior youth group with them. Two eighteen-year-old youth who were ready to serve as animators have dedicated themselves to the progress of this group and receive regular support and assistance from the cluster coordinator of the program. We are now holding intensive institute courses one weekend every month for the youth in our neighborhood. We are determined to accompany them in carrying out the requisite acts of service, which will, no doubt, lead to the formation of new junior youth groups and children's classes.

- Approximately a year ago, we decided to dedicate a few cycles of activity to bringing youth into the institute process. We found that many young people in our cluster were eager to take charge of their intellectual and spiritual growth and to serve the community. We expected that, in time, a number of them would arise to serve as children's class teachers and animators of junior youth groups. At that point there were already ten strong junior youth groups in the cluster, but after a while they were inadvertently neglected and began to fall apart as our experienced animators did not consistently work with them. As soon as we realized this, a few new junior youth groups were hastily formed to replace those that had been lost. These, however, do not seem to be faring well. It has become clear that, if the present group of animators had been accompanied in their efforts to perform simpler acts of service before taking on full responsibility for a group, they would have been better prepared for what they are now trying to do.

- The number of junior youth groups in our cluster has remained at fifteen for the past two years. At first, we were excited to have formed that many groups, yet we have not learned how to sustain the majority of them for three years. Every few cycles new junior youth groups are started to replace the ones that, for one reason or another, have stopped meeting. We are now realizing that we are not reading reality accurately when we just say that we have fifteen junior youth groups. We must learn to both sustain existing groups and progressively build capacity for adding new ones.

- Among the youth who are participating in the institute process in our village, five are acting as animators of junior youth groups and three are teaching children's classes, having completed the requisite books in the main sequence. Meanwhile, the rest are studying earlier books in the sequence, attending devotional meetings, and gaining experience in sharing with others what they are learning. All these youth were members

of two junior youth groups that had been sustained for the period of three years. The animators of these two groups had many other responsibilities, but they remained dedicated to the groups that had been formed. We can now see the fruits of their efforts.

Drawing on the experience gained by you and the members of your group, identify other situations that lend themselves to the same kind of analysis. The longer the duration of the experience analyzed, the more insights it will offer. For those examples in which continuity of action was not maintained, how could the work have been approached differently?

## SECTION 20

In furthering the aims of the enterprise in which we are engaged, we are determined to resist the forces that dissipate energy and to remain focused in a distracted world. We are well aware of the dangers of two extremes: on the one hand, a belief that maintaining focus requires the rigid pursuit of only one activity and, on the other, a conviction that all activities are equally valuable and should receive the same amount of attention. As early as 1927, Shoghi Effendi expressed the following in a letter sent to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada—this, in the context of the necessity for "a careful estimation" of available resources and how they should be applied to the expansion of activities occurring at that time:

> **"Much as I rejoice in witnessing the abundant signs of unfaltering energy that characterize in various fields and distant lands the mission of the valiant warriors of the Cause, I cannot help observing that, driven by their impetuous eagerness to establish the undisputed reign of Bahá'u'lláh on this earth, they may by an undue multiplication of their activities, and the consequent dissipation of their forces, defeat the very purpose which animates them in the pursuit of their glorious task."**[35]

Maintaining focus requires the willingness and the discipline to prioritize. The Universal House of Justice states the following in its message dated 27 December 2005 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors:

> **"Perhaps the task that will occupy the attention of you and your auxiliaries above all others is to assist the community in its effort to maintain focus. This ability, slowly acquired through successive Plans, represents one of its most valuable assets, hard won through discipline, commitment and foresight as the friends and their institutions have learned to pursue the single aim of advancing the process of entry by troops. On the one hand, you will find it necessary to discourage the tendency to confuse focus with uniformity or exclusivity. To maintain focus does not imply that special needs and interests are neglected, much less that essential activities are dropped in order to accommodate others. Clearly, there are a host of elements that comprise Bahá'í community life, shaped over the decades, which must be further refined and developed. On the other hand, you will want to take every opportunity to reinforce the disposition to prioritize—one which recognizes that not all activities have the same importance at a given stage of growth, that some must necessarily take precedence over others, that even the most well-intentioned proposals can cause distraction, dissipate energy or impede progress.**

**What should be plainly acknowledged is that the time available for the friends to serve the Faith in every community is not without limits. It is only natural to expect that the preponderating share of this limited resource would be expended in meeting the provisions of the Plan."**[36]

And, in its message of 30 December 2021 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, it expresses the following:

**"Over the last series of Plans, the community's capacity to maintain focus on the Faith's most pressing needs emerged as one of its most important strengths. However, this sense of focus has to accommodate many lines of action, all of which must advance without being in competition. This calls for an expanded vision, a nuanced understanding of coexisting imperatives, added flexibility, and heightened institutional collaboration. We are conscious that the Faith's resources are finite, and individuals experience many demands on their time. But as the Plan unfolds in a given place and the ranks of those who are willing to serve swell, the varied aspects of a rich and vibrant Bahá'í community life will advance in step, and the society-building power of the Faith shine forth."**[37]

In this and the previous section, we have introduced two features that distinguish how we approach the work before us: that we focus on the priorities that the House of Justice establishes for us at each stage of the Divine Plan and that we are acutely aware of the intricate relationship between change and continuity. Clearly these two characteristics are interrelated. You may find it helpful to reflect on how the capacity to focus and the capacity to maintain continuity of action manifest themselves in the efforts made by each of the three protagonists—the individual, the community, and the institutions.

- The individual: _____

- The community: _____

- The institutions: _____

## SECTION 21

We owe much of our ability to undertake increasingly complex and sophisticated action to our constant effort to achieve a high degree of integration and coherence in all that we do. We strive to ensure that the multiple activities being established in a cluster or region are complementary and mutually supportive, each contributing to the advancement of others and fostering, in their totality, a "rich and intricate pattern of life". The insights gained and the

qualities, attitudes, and skills developed in one activity, then, serve to enhance our effectiveness in another. That we work in a learning mode within one common, overarching framework, which evolves and becomes more elaborate as experience accumulates, makes it possible to achieve greater and greater degrees of coherence in our endeavors. The passage below, written by the Universal House of Justice, describes how a well-integrated pattern of growth unfolds.

> **"A rich tapestry of community life begins to emerge in every cluster as acts of communal worship, interspersed with discussions undertaken in the intimate setting of the home, are woven together with activities that provide spiritual education to all members of the population—adults, youth and children. Social consciousness is heightened naturally as, for example, lively conversations proliferate among parents regarding the aspirations of their children and service projects spring up at the initiative of junior youth. Once human resources in a cluster are in sufficient abundance, and the pattern of growth firmly established, the community's engagement with society can, and indeed must, increase."[38]**

As we are challenged to respond to a widening range of social issues, the question of coherence, "so fundamental to the Plan's evolving framework for action," the House of Justice tells us, "assumes new dimensions". Here is its guidance in this connection:

> **"Involvement in the life of society will flourish as the capacity of the community to promote its own growth and to maintain its vitality is gradually raised. It will achieve coherence with efforts to expand and consolidate the community to the extent that it draws on elements of the conceptual framework which governs the current series of global Plans. And it will contribute to the movement of populations towards Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a prosperous and peaceful world civilization to the degree that it employs these elements creatively in new areas of learning."[39]**

It is noteworthy that, in referring to "places where receptivity wells up, those small centers of population where intense activity can be sustained", the House of Justice states:

> **"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 process of collective transformation is most keenly felt—here that, in time, the society-building power inherent in the Faith becomes most visible."[40]**

We have explored here and in the preceding two sections what it means for us to remain focused, to maintain continuity in action, and to seek progressively higher degrees of coherence and integration in our endeavors. Write one or two paragraphs, based on the reality of the cluster to which you belong, that describe your understanding of how these three features of our approach have contributed to its steady progress. The following words and phrases will assist you in formulating your description:

> build, prioritize, resources, continuity, intensity, time, learning, strength, systematic, accompany, individual, energy, consistent action, unity, community, coherence, accomplishments, institutions, consultation, integration, mutually supportive, conceptual framework

## SECTION 22

A most fundamental characteristic of everything we do, individually and collectively, is our unwavering dedication to building unity. The Universal House of Justice tells us in its Riḍván 2017 message:

**"As every follower of Bahá'u'lláh knows well, humanity's ultimate well-being is dependent upon its differences being transcended and its unity firmly established. Every contribution Bahá'ís make to the life of their society is aimed at fostering unity; every community-building endeavor is directed towards the same end. For those tired of contention, the communities growing under the shadow of the Greatest Name offer a potent example of what unity can achieve."[41]**

This dedication to the cause of unity is only possible because we strive to reach higher and higher levels of unity of purpose, unity of thought, and unity in action. In a letter written on behalf of the House of Justice to an individual believer, it is explained:

**"Eliminating social problems, rather than merely ameliorating them to an extent, requires unity of thought as well as action, an open heart as well as an open hand—conditions which Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is intended to bring about."[42]**

In the message dated 28 December 2010 to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, the House of Justice writes:

**"Composed of such individuals and such institutions, the community of the Greatest Name becomes that spiritually charged arena in which powers are multiplied in unified action. It is of this community that 'Abdu'l-Bahá writes: 'When any souls grow to be true believers, they will attain a spiritual relationship with one another, and show forth a tenderness which is not of this world. They will, all of them, become elated from a draught of divine love, and that union of theirs, that connection, will also abide forever. Souls, that is, who will consign their own selves to oblivion, strip from themselves the defects of humankind, and unchain themselves from human bondage, will beyond any doubt be illumined with the heavenly splendors of oneness, and will all attain unto real union in the world that dieth not.'"[43]**

Were such an emphasis on unity to be misunderstood, it would be easy for us to turn inward and be content with loving fellowship amongst ourselves. It is remarkable that, through the application of the provisions of the global Plans of the Faith, the community of the Greatest Name has been able to resist this natural tendency. Below are a few excerpts from the guidance of the House of Justice that address this theme.

**"The community is serving more and more as that environment in which individual effort and collective action, mediated by the institute, can complement each other in order to achieve progress. The vibrancy it manifests and the unity of purpose that animates its endeavors are drawing into its swelling ranks those from every walk of life eager to dedicate their time and energies to the welfare of humanity. That the doors of the community are more widely open for any receptive soul to enter and receive sustenance from Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation is clear."[44]**

**"Furthermore, Bahá'ís are engaged in cities and villages across the globe in establishing a pattern of life in which increasing numbers, irrespective of background, are invited to take part. . . . This pattern of community life is giving rise to vibrant and purposeful new communities wherein relationships are founded on the oneness of mankind, universal participation, justice, and freedom from**

**prejudice. All are welcome. The process which is unfolding seeks to foster collaboration and build capacity within every human group—with no regard to class or religious background, with no concern for ethnicity or race, and irrespective of gender or social status—to arise and contribute to the advancement of civilization."**[45]

**"Wherever an intensive program of growth is established, let the friends spare no effort to increase the level of participation. Let them strain every nerve to ensure that the system which they have so laboriously erected does not close in on itself but progressively expands to embrace more and more people."**[46]

**"At the heart of such developments is a growing awareness of the implications of the universality and comprehensiveness of the Faith. Collective action is governed more and more by the principle that Bahá'u'lláh's message should be given liberally and unconditionally to humanity. Most gratifying are the endeavors being made to reach receptive populations with the teachings of the Faith. As unrelenting social and political forces continue to uproot people from their homelands and sweep them across continents, an uncompromising appreciation for a diversity of backgrounds and for the strength it confers on the whole will prove crucial to the expansion and consolidation of the community."**[47]

**"We do not doubt that every cluster, given time, will progress along the continuum of development; the communities that have advanced most quickly, relative to those whose circumstances and possibilities were similar, have shown an ability to foster unity of thought and to learn about effective action. And they did so without hesitating to act."**[48]

Although unity is a subject that cannot be treated adequately here, in order to reflect on the various dimensions of unity building as a feature of our approach, you may wish to say a few words about how unity of purpose, unity of thought, and unified action, mentioned in the above quotations, are increasingly manifested in collective efforts to contribute to spiritual and material transformation in the villages and in the neighborhoods of towns and cities with which you are familiar.

## SECTION 23

In these sections, we have explored many of the vital characteristics that define our approach to the transformation of society. Let us bring this unit to an end by remembering that, in working for the realization of Bahá'u'lláh's vision of a new society, we are fulfilling our part in the Minor Plan of God. Meanwhile, the operation of His Major Plan—the second way in which "His purpose for humankind is going forward"—continues to gather force. The Universal House of Justice tells us:

> **"The Major Plan is associated with turbulence and calamity and proceeds with an apparent, random disorderliness, but is, in fact, inexorably driving humanity towards unity and maturity. Its agency for the most part is the people who are ignorant of its course and even antagonistic towards its aim. As Shoghi Effendi has pointed out, God's Major Plan uses 'both the mighty and the lowly as pawns in His world-shaping game, for the fulfillment of His immediate purpose and the eventual establishment of His Kingdom on earth.' The acceleration of the processes it generates is lending impetus to developments which, with all the initial pain and heartache attributable to them, we Bahá'ís see as signs of the emergence of the Lesser Peace."[49]**

The House of Justice explains further: "Unlike His Major Plan, which works mysteriously, God's Minor Plan is clearly delineated, operates according to orderly and well-known processes, and has been given to us to execute. Its ultimate goal is the Most Great Peace." The Minor Plan unfolds in stages, each of which is governed by a global Plan

articulated by the Head of the Faith. “It is to the achievement of its purpose”, the House of Justice makes clear, “that we must all devote our attention and energies.”

As indicated in the passage below from a message addressed by the House of Justice to the Counsellors, dedication to the achievement of the purpose of each Plan springs from the yearning to be aligned with the Will of God.

> **“The nature of the planning process with which you will be helping the friends is in many ways unique. At its core it is a spiritual process in which communities and institutions strive to align their pursuits with the Will of God. The Major Plan of God is at work and the forces it generates impel humanity towards its destiny. In their own plans of action, the institutions of the Faith must seek to gain insight into the operation of these great forces, explore the potentialities of the people they serve, measure the resources and strengths of their communities, and take practical steps to enlist the unreserved participation of the believers.”**[50]

This conviction, then, that the Will of God is working simultaneously through the Major Plan and the Minor Plan—the provisions of the latter being expressed in the successive global Plans given to us by the Universal House of Justice—is a most unique feature of every endeavor that we undertake to contribute to the emergence of a new civilization. Addressing the Continental Counsellors, the Supreme Body states the following:

> **“Above all, the friends need to remain ever conscious of the magnitude of the spiritual forces that are at their disposition. They are members of a community ‘whose world-embracing, continually consolidating activities constitute the one integrating process in a world whose institutions, secular as well as religious, are for the most part dissolving’. Of all the peoples of the world, ‘they alone can recognize, amidst the welter of a tempestuous age, the Hand of the Divine Redeemer that traces its course and controls its destinies. They alone are aware of the silent growth of that orderly world polity whose fabric they themselves are weaving.’ It is their institutions that ‘will come to be regarded as the hallmark and glory of the age’ they have been called upon to establish. The ‘building process,’ to which they are consecrated, is ‘the one hope of a stricken society.’ For, it is ‘actuated by the generating influence of God’s changeless Purpose, and is evolving within the framework of the Administrative Order of His Faith.’ And remind them that they are the illumined souls envisioned by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His prayer: ‘Heroes are they, O my Lord, lead them to the field of battle. Guides are they, make them to speak out with arguments and proofs. Ministering servants are they, cause them to pass round the cup that brimmeth with the wine of certitude. O my God, make them to be songsters that carol in fair gardens, make them lions that couch in the thickets, whales that plunge in the vasty deep.’”**[51]

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