

Community and Collective Action

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In neighborhoods and villages around the world, tens, hundreds, and in some places, thousands of people, inspired by the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, are engaged in activities that aim to “build community.” In their efforts, we can already see signs of the emergence of new patterns of collective life: a village coming together regularly at the hour of dawn to summon divine assistance before the day’s work; a group of people combining skills and knowledge to carry out a reforestation project; neighbors consulting on ways to establish classes for the spiritual education of their children; a population beginning to shed age-old prejudices and build new patterns of interaction based on justice and unity; young adults, in rural and urban settings, initiating small-scale agricultural projects to support their communities—examples like these and many more are springing up from every continent and multiplying.

The current global crisis has raised awareness about the importance of human solidarity and collective action. Within this context, it seems timely to ask ourselves: What is the place of community in our modern world and what is the kind of community towards which we aspire?

The image that is evoked by the word *community* can be quite different from one person to the next. Some think of a community simply as those who live in the same geographic area, regardless of whether its members interact; others use the word to refer to a collection of people who share common interests or are motivated by the pursuit a common goal; and, for many, community is seen as a population that shares a common ethnic identity and set of traditions. We also come across people who believe that the sense of togetherness that we need as human beings can be fulfilled through virtual networks, and some thinkers even predict that the whole concept of a community as it has been traditionally known will eventually disappear.

Although certain aspects of the conceptions above may be valuable, the relationships that sustain society are also being reconceptualized by many in light of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Our understanding of community, then, will need to move beyond anything humanity currently knows or has experienced. To build a common vision of community, we turn to the messages of the Universal House of Justice. For instance, in 1996, the House of Justice described a community as

a comprehensive unit of civilization composed of individuals, families, and institutions that are originators and encouragers of systems, agencies and organizations working together with a common purpose for the welfare of people both within and beyond its borders; it is a composition of diverse, interacting participants that are achieving unity in an unremitting quest for spiritual and social progress.¹

The House of Justice has also written about “vibrant communities,” describing them as being characterized by “tolerance and love and guided by a strong sense of purpose and collective will” and explaining that they provide an “environment in which the capacities of all components—men, women, youth and children—are developed and their powers multiplied in unified action.”²

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Over the past decade, Bahá’í community-building efforts have unfolded in smaller geographic areas like neighborhoods and villages. This process has been very similar to the organic processes that take place in nature. Indeed, creating something new in social reality is, like the growth of a tree, an organic process that begins by planting a seed in fertile soil.

The process begins with a group of people inspired by a hopeful vision of change who take action together within the context of a neighborhood or village. The initial steps they take are not random or haphazard but rather unfold within a framework defined by the growing experience of the worldwide Bahá’í community. The various elements that cohere to advance this process include classes for the spiritual education of children; groups of junior youth who, together with an older youth, support one another, study together, and carry out acts of service; the opening of homes and community centers for collective prayer and discussions about the progress of a neighborhood or village; regular visits by neighbors to meet with one another and strengthen bonds of friendship; educational programs for youth and adults in which they reflect on the spiritual dimension of life and prepare themselves for a life of service; and in some places, initiatives that seek to enhance the social and material well-being of a population. Whatever the form and arrangement of activities, however, the process of community building is a process of transformation in which a population takes ownership of its own spiritual and social development.

The fruit of the process of community building is a unit of civilization that is characterized by the principles and teachings of Bahá’u’lláh. The House of Justice has explained the long-term nature of these efforts:

The work advancing in every corner of the globe today represents the latest stage of the ongoing Bahá’í endeavour to create the nucleus of the glorious civilization enshrined in His teachings, the building of which is an enterprise of infinite complexity and scale, one that will demand centuries of exertion by humanity to bring to fruition. There are no shortcuts, no formulas. Only as effort is made to draw on insights from His Revelation, to tap into the accumulating knowledge of the human race, to apply His teachings intelligently to the life of humanity, and to consult on the questions that arise will the necessary learning occur and capacity be developed.³

We are, of course, too early in these efforts to know exactly what the entire process looks like, what stages we will have to pass through, what obstacles we might face along the way, and what capacities will need to be developed at each stage of development by the members of the community, individually and collectively. These are questions we must ask ourselves in the years and decades to come, and answers to these questions will become clear to us as we engage in a systematic process of learning.

Much has already been learned about the early stages of community building: A group of people turns to the sacred Writings and the guidance of the Universal House of Justice and takes action within a framework defined by the growing experience of the worldwide Bahá'í community; it draws insights from the existing body of knowledge and reflects on experience; it has regular conversations in which questions are asked and ideas are clarified; and, as understanding advances, the group adjusts its plans, approaches, and activities. The result is that its efforts become more and more effective, and the process it is trying to promote advances. In this way, the Bahá'í community is gradually developing its capacity to operate in a mode of learning and, as an organic global community, is advancing collectively.

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As people learn more about the process of community building and how to effectively contribute to it, certain questions arise. For instance, what is my conception of community and what contributions can I make to the development of my community? What are those qualities, skills, and abilities that need to be developed in individuals and in groups to build vibrant communities? What are the things that are needed to enhance the relationships in a community? In seeking answers to these questions, we turn to the guiding and operating principles involved. As we understand these principles better and internalize them, they begin to find expression in our actions. They influence how we see ourselves in relation to others which in turn influences how we interact with others.

There are many principles that are relevant to the process of community building. Foremost among these is the oneness of humankind. Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, talked about the principle of oneness as “the pivot round which all the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh revolve.”⁴ He said that it cannot be seen as a “mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope” and that it cannot be merely identified with the “reawakening of the spirit of brotherhood and good-will among men.”⁵ It has profound implications for every aspect of the organized life of society. Having the principle of oneness in mind as the guiding and operating principle sheds light on the process of community building and gives direction to our efforts as participants.

In His letter to Queen Victoria, Bahá'u'lláh writes: “Regard the world as the human body.” This metaphor of the human body, or a living organism, was also often used by ‘Abdu'l-Bahá when He wanted to illustrate the implications of the principle of the oneness of humankind. Like any analogy, there are limits to how much it can explain. Nevertheless, like the elements of the human body, “all the members of this endless universe are linked one to another.” He urged us to act as the members of one body, each connected to the other with “a linkage complete and perfect”⁶ and contributing its part for the benefit of the whole. He said that “man cannot live singly and alone. He is in need of continuous cooperation and mutual help... He can never, singly and alone, provide himself with all the necessities of existence. Therefore, he is in need of cooperation and reciprocity.” The House of Justice, in commenting on this metaphor, has further explained:

In the human body, every cell, every organ, every nerve has its part to play. When all do so the body is healthy, vigorous, radiant, ready for every call made upon it. No cell, however humble, lives apart from the body, whether in serving it

or receiving from it. This is true of the body of mankind in which God “has endowed each humble being with ability and talent”⁷

Some characteristics of the living organism suggest where to focus our efforts as individuals. For example, the cells of the body are intimately connected to each other; their existence is purely in relation to the whole body. There is no possibility for the cell to live without its connection to the rest. The purpose of the cell is to maintain the health of the body and, at the same time, its life depends on it. In this regard, a characteristic that stands out is the necessity for the basic units of the organism to be selfless. Cells, in their very essence, are selfless. They are made that way. They adapt their functions in order to respond to unforeseen needs or emergencies or to protect the organism. The cell also takes only what it needs from the organism. The behavior of healthy cells in the body illustrates well the high standard that the individual whose purpose is to work for the common good aspires to as a member of a group or community. This implies, for instance, giving of one’s time and energy generously, sacrificing when the situation requires it, being detached from the results of what we do, and carrying out our actions with sincerity and purity of heart.

This concept of selfless service and the responsibilities that everyone has in accomplishing the collective aim have many implications for the way we relate to others and to our work. It adds significance to various roles and responsibilities that we undertake. To see ourselves like the cells of the body implies that each of us gives our very best in fulfilling our responsibilities; each one is conscious that everything he or she does influences the functioning of the community. And since each of us is responsible not only for his or her part but also for the functioning of the whole, cooperation and reciprocity should characterize relationships. In such an environment, everyone strives to draw out the best in people and to help others develop their full potential and takes joy in the progress of others.

This concept of selfless service also has implications for the manner in which we approach the acts of service we undertake and our various roles and responsibilities in a community. Serving with selflessness and diligence requires making choices, because, unlike the cells, we have free will. To put the interests of the collective before our own and to devote ourselves to doing things with excellence; to be ready to collaborate; to prefer our brothers and sisters over ourselves; to orient ourselves toward that which brings about the well-being of the community; to move beyond the inertia that sometimes holds us back from working to the best of our ability—all of these are individual choices that have to be made consciously. To give of ourselves is embedded in our nature; it is a capacity within us that can be developed and strengthened through constant effort, prayer, reflection, and the acquisition of knowledge. Maybe a word of caution is also needed here: To put the interest of the community before our own does not imply that we lose our individuality. We do not become dissolved in the community. There are many references in the Writings that shed light on the question of serving the common good.

O My Servant!

Thou art even as a finely tempered sword concealed in the darkness of its sheath and its value hidden from the artificer’s knowledge. Wherefore come forth from the sheath of self and desire that thy worth may be made resplendent and manifest unto all the world.⁸

Senses and faculties have been bestowed upon us, to be devoted to the service of the general good; so that we, distinguished above all other forms of life for perceptiveness and reason, should labor at all times and along all lines, whether the occasion be great or small, ordinary or extraordinary, until all mankind are safely gathered into the impregnable stronghold of knowledge.⁹

How excellent, how honorable is man if he arises to fulfil his responsibilities; how wretched and contemptible, if he shuts his eyes to the welfare of society and wastes his precious life in pursuing his own selfish interests and personal advantages.¹⁰

In these early stages of building this new kind of community that reflects the divine teachings, we have to learn how to manage the apparent tension between pursuing our own interests and contributing to the common good. It is a very real tension within human beings. Undoubtedly, this will always be the case, since it is part of human nature. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has explained:

Man is in the ultimate degree of materiality and the beginning of spirituality; that is, he is at the end of imperfection and the beginning of perfection. He is at the furthest degree of darkness and the beginning of the light. That is why the station of man is said to be the end of night and the beginning of day, meaning that he encompasses all the degrees of imperfection and that he potentially possesses all the degrees of perfection. He has both an animal side and an angelic side, and the role of the educator is to so train human souls that the angelic side may overcome the animal. Thus, should the divine powers, which are identical with perfection, overcome in man the satanic powers, which are absolute imperfection, he becomes the noblest of all creatures, but should the converse take place, he becomes the vilest of all beings. That is why he is the end of imperfection and the beginning of perfection.¹¹

Although this tension will always be there, the Bahá’í writings also explain that the desire to do good is inherent in human nature because we are created noble. This desire to do good, however, needs to be cultivated and strengthened. It is through faith and our spiritual alignment with the will of God that we are enabled to do this.

The image of the functioning of the human body also gives us insights into the quality of the relationships that should exist within a healthy community. In the human body, we can appreciate how healthy interactions take place and how they contribute to maintaining unity and harmony among the diverse parts. Different organs, each with their own assigned functions, work together to allow new capacities to emerge—capacities that are manifested only when all the parts are functioning properly, each in its own sphere, and in perfect synchronization. Some of these capacities are associated with a specific organ while others do not belong to any particular one; the emergence of such capacities requires cooperation and reciprocity among the parts of the body. Whenever this cooperation breaks down or is replaced by competition, the body’s ability to manifest these capacities is inhibited.

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The intention of this presentation is not to present a thorough analysis of the process of community building. It is simply to share a few ideas for reflection on the

efforts of Bahá'í communities worldwide to bring about a new kind of community and ultimately contribute to the emergence of a peaceful and just world civilization envisioned in the sacred Writings. In this connection, we have spent some time examining the implications of the principle of the oneness of humankind. The analogy of a human body was used to see how the principle of oneness is foundational to our conception of a community and guides our choices and our actions.

The Bahá'í world is still in the early stages of the process of community building, and there is a great deal to be done before the process reaches fruition. In light of the challenges facing humanity, the task before us may seem daunting indeed, but we are committed to this process over the long term and are inspired to make constant efforts to better understand the relevant principles and to reflect this understanding in our approaches. We draw on spiritual forces to assist us and to propel us forward, and the most powerful force binding us together is the force of universal love. 'Abdu'l-Baha addresses us: "Strive to increase the love-power of reality" and "to make your hearts greater centers of attraction and to create new ideals and relationships."¹² Love, He writes, is "the magnetic force that directeth the movements of the spheres in the celestial realms" and "the establisher of true civilization in this mortal world."¹³

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Notes

1. Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 1996. Available at www.bahai.org/r/045175659
2. Universal House of Justice, from a letter to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors dated 26 December 1995. Available at www.bahai.org/r/864076551
3. Universal House of Justice, Riḍván 2010. Available at www.bahai.org/r/178319844
4. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*. Available at www.bahai.org/r/264008982
5. Ibid.
6. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. Available at www.bahai.org/r/189063524
7. Universal House of Justice, letter of September 1994 to the Bahá'ís of the World regarding subject of universal participation. Bahá'í Reference Library. Available at www.bahai.org/r/874127903
8. Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*. Available at www.bahai.org/r/261142065
9. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. Available at www.bahai.org/r/574361742
10. Ibid.
11. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*. Available at www.bahai.org/r/265818142
12. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *'Abdu'l-Bahá on Divine Philosophy*, (Boston: The Tudor Press, 1918), 107.
13. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*. Available at www.bahai.org/r/407306067