

OVERCOMING BARRIERS To UNITY

AN ESSAY ON GROUP HARMONY

WITH A SELECTION OF EXTRACTS
FROM THE BAHÁ'Í WRITINGS
ON THE SUBJECT OF UNITY

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DEDICATED to the memory of my friend and Bahá'í teacher, Mark Hopkins.

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OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO UNITY

The dawn of this new day beckons our attention and lures us toward the little-known realm of an existence called unity. Unity! An attractive concept, but what does it mean, really? How can we tell when it exists? How do we recognize it? What does it feel like? How can we contribute to its realization? These questions perplex the minds of those who seek a united world, who seek peace, who seek a trust with others, social healing, justice in our affairs and general tranquillity for all people.

Bahá'u'lláh, the Supreme Manifestation of God, unveils the unique value of unity, and in numerous Tablets, intimates of its glorious outcome. In one such Tablet He declares unity to be the prerequisite to power itself. “No **power*** can exist except through unity,”¹ He says. This **power** He speaks of is defined in the dictionary as the “*possession of control, authority, or influence over others.*”² Does this suggest that the ability to influence positive change and the power to make meaningful things happen, like those mentioned above, can come about only in the presence of a united people? “So powerful is the light of unity,” Bahá'u'lláh announces, “that it can illuminate the whole earth.”³ And again: “The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established.”⁴ So what is this unity He speaks of repeatedly and with such emphasis? What is this unity that Bahá'ís all over the world emphasize as the central theme of their religious faith?

The intent in the forthcoming pages is to explore the Bahá'í concept of unity and to pursue a broader perspective of that concept, which will enable both individual and collective movement toward unity and away from disunity. The examination of this process of change will include suggestions regarding methods and skills which can enhance its implementation. This is not intended to be an examination of unity and its association to interpersonal relationships on a one-to-one basis, although many of the dynamics are similar, nor will this examination consider the many different levels of unity. Instead, the focus here will be the investigation of how our unity is affected by the dynamics of communication within the Bahá'í consultative process at administrative functions, group meetings and other community activities.

This investigation will, furthermore, attempt to identify specific emotions and behavior that signal our personal contribution to, or our interference with, a united community. Hopefully, this assessment will help provide us with an impression of where we are as individuals, or as communities, on that vast continuum that exists between the degrees of unity and disunity.

The Bahá'í Sacred Writings clearly state that humankind is entering its age of maturity as a result of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.⁵ Since unity is the central theme of this most recent Revelation — a dispensation to last nothing less than one thousand years — it seems reasonable to assume that we in the Bahá'í community, and definitely the world at large, have merely begun the development of this condition called unity. Most of us have experienced, at some time or another, an inkling of the wonders of unity — while among the Bahá'í friends, within our families, or with some other socially bonded group. Many have

* All **bolded** words and phrases are author's emphasis expressed experiencing times of profound unity. Considerable consultation with Bahá'ís

confirms that, for many, it was this condition of unity, manifest among the believers, which attracted them to the Faith, or at least significantly influenced their desire to pursue an investigation of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh. It is these joyous experiences of unity that inspire us to continue seeking its abundance.

Since it is early in the dispensation we have had little time to develop this unity in depth. Curiosity about its reality demands a deeper investigation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá did affirm that unity has existed in limited forms in the past when He wrote: "*In cycles gone by, though harmony was established, yet, owing to the absence of means, the unity of all mankind could not have been achieved.*"⁶ Even though unity has existed in the past, perhaps among some tribes or civilizations prior to our time, historically we have little to examine in order to understand exactly what it is, or how its eventual attainment will affect individual and social life. We do, however, have an abundance of historical experience of what our world is like without unity. To gain a more clear perspective, then, we will examine both unity and its absence — disunity. In this world of opposites and contrast, examination of one extreme often helps us define, understand and appreciate the other.

WHAT IS UNITY

To understand what unity means, let's take a look at some synonyms of the word and also the implications of its meaning from the intimations given us by Bahá'u'lláh. Unity, in Webster's definition, enjoys a similarity with such states or conditions as oneness, coherence, harmony, concord, fusion, union, agreement, connectedness, friendliness and attraction. Bahá'u'lláh uses the term concomitant with such words as concord, understanding, solidarity, amity, friendliness, loving-kindness, fellowship and love.⁷ These descriptive terms imply that unity among human beings is a condition of harmonious social order where people live in a state of loving attraction one to another, vitalized by some common force and destined to become bonded in some collective purpose. This unity seems to create a condition in human affairs which provides for the maximum benefit of each individual person while simultaneously contributing to the development of the whole of humanity. It also appears to include a state of interdependence, where both the development of the individual and the progress of humanity as a whole are inherently related to each other. Unity surely is a special condition in social affairs, where a unique emotional state exists among people, providing for their peaceful and harmonious interaction.

A loving, united community nurtures in each of us those feelings or emotions that are most desirable to all human beings. It creates a social environment where those who come upon this community feel naturally welcomed and at home. One intuitively knows this is a place where there is physical and emotional safety and trust. Belonging to a united community makes people feel comforted and protected. Most people express great joy and excitement when sharing with others the value of belonging to such a community. A strong desire to be together and to be of service to one another permeates the souls of a united people. The predominance of these and other positive emotions within the hearts of the believers signals the prevailing presence of unity in a Bahá'í community.

Unity furthermore enhances close interpersonal relationships; relationships where we eagerly anticipate working, playing and serving together; relationships characterized by unconditional acceptance and love of one another for who we are as individuals; relationships that create a natural desire to encourage each other in our personal endeavors; relationships containing such gentleness and care that trust and a feeling of safety prevail;

relationships in which we motivate, teach and enlighten one another by exemplary behavior. Unity evokes in our hearts the desire and appeal for its continued presence unlike anything previously experienced. It is a wondrous condition to behold!

The presence of unity results in endless desirable outcomes. In addition to those already recognized, it creates a social environment allowing us to achieve one of our fundamental purposes — *“to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization.”*⁸ Not only does it allow us to realize this ongoing objective, but it makes the path enjoyable and more meaningful along the way.

The essential requirement for this very special condition of unity is the consolidating force of love. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us that love is *“the vital bond inherent, in accordance with the divine creation, in the realities of things.”*⁹ Love itself, as the *“vital bond,”* appears to be the cohesive force that causes a united community to come into being. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá guides us even further and tells us how to enhance this binding force of love within ourselves. He states: *“If a man has ten good qualities and one bad one, ...look at the ten and forget the one; and if a man has ten bad qualities and one good one, ...look at the one and forget the ten.”*¹⁰ It is this focus of our attention on the good in others that assures the existence of love in our relationships and thus our unity.

We know from the writings and talks of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that it is the nature of the heart to love and that our hearts will love only those things in which we find **personal** value. If the heart dwells on the good it perceives in others it will be attracted to that good and love will exist in abundance. Conversely, if it dwells on the faults of another, repulsion ensues and the heart cannot and will not be attracted to, or love, anything it is repulsed by.

Unity among humans, then, must be a state or condition of love and attraction, considerably dependent upon our willingness to focus on the positive qualities inherent in each other. This primary prerequisite arouses the instinctive desire to be intimately bonded with one another in a state of unity.

WHAT IS DISUNITY

An attempt to explore the wonders of unity would be incomplete without a serious effort to understand what prevents its presence or interferes with its development. To understand this clearly, an earnest analysis of disunity is in order.

From our investigation of the meaning of unity, we can assume that the definition of disunity is a condition in human affairs distinctly opposite of unity. A condition where disharmony, separation, repulsion, avoidance, dislike, conflict, diffusion, contention, disharmony, disagreement, unfriendliness, isolation and even hatred might exist in a society.

This disunity can come about in one of two ways: it can either result from a sense of self-superiority on the part of individuals and the resulting actions thereof, or it can come about when we unintentionally communicate in ways that are offensive to another. Either of these can interfere with the unity of a community. First we will consider disunity that stems from an improper attitude of self-superiority. Later we will examine disunity which can come about from unfriendly communication.

Disunity often originates from one identifiable misconception: due to the recognition within ourselves of some special quality, merit or attribute, we perceive or assume a sense

of superiority or favored distinction when we compare ourselves with other human beings. This attitude may be a conscious perspective that we are aware of, or it may be a subconscious sense of superiority that we don't even know we have. The dangerous outcomes of this false assumption in either case, and their effects on unity, are disclosed by Bahá'u'lláh: *“And amongst the realms of unity is the unity of rank and station. It redoundeth to the exaltation of the Cause, glorifying it among all peoples. Ever since the seeking of preference and distinction came into play, the world hath been laid waste. It hath become desolate. Those who have quaffed from the ocean of divine utterance and fixed their gaze upon the Realm of Glory should regard themselves as being on the same level as the others and in the same station. Were this matter to be definitely established and conclusively demonstrated through the power and might of God, the world would become as the Abhá Paradise.*

“Indeed, man is noble, inasmuch as each one is a repository of the sign of God. Nevertheless, to regard oneself as superior in knowledge, learning or virtue, or to exalt oneself or seek preference, is a grievous transgression. Great is the blessedness of those who are adorned with the ornament of this unity and have been graciously confirmed by God.”¹¹

The slightest presence of this false perception, that our physical, mental or spiritual characteristics are somehow more valuable than those of others, must eventually result in disunity. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá too warns us of the danger of such a harmful perspective: *“In the religion of Bahá'u'lláh all are servants and maidservants, brothers and sisters. As soon as one feels a little better than, a little superior to the rest, he is in a dangerous position, and unless he casts away the seed of such an evil thought, he is not a fit instrument for the service of the Kingdom.”¹²*

In the Bahá'í Teachings we are guided to view differences of people as valuable assets to ourselves and the whole of humankind. Viewed in this light, we can understand that such differences are actually complementary to our survival and our aspiration to flourish. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá elaborated on this theme: *“Thus when that unifying force, the penetrating influence of the Word of God, taketh effect, the difference of customs, manners, habits, ideas, opinions and dispositions embellisheth the world of humanity. This diversity, this difference is like the naturally created dissimilarity and variety of the limbs and organs of the human body, for each one contributeth to the beauty, efficiency and perfection of the whole. When these different limbs and organs come under the influence of man's sovereign soul, and the soul's power pervadeth the limbs and members, veins and arteries of the body, then difference reinforceth harmony, diversity strengtheneth love, and multiplicity is the greatest factor for coordination.”¹³ “O ye lovers of this wronged one!” Writes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: *“Cleanse ye your eyes, so that ye behold no man as different from yourselves. See ye no strangers; rather see all men as friends, for love and unity come hard when ye fix your gaze on otherness. And in this new and wondrous age, the Holy Writings say that we must be at one with every people; that we must see neither harshness nor injustice, neither malevolence, nor hostility, nor hate, but rather turn our eyes toward the heaven of ancient glory. For each of the creatures is a sign of God, and it was by the grace of the Lord and His power that each did step into the world; therefore they are not strangers, but in the family; not aliens, but friends, and to be treated as such.”¹⁴**

Bahá'u'lláh's expectation that we each strive to abandon the idea of personal preference and instead adopt the attitude that differences are actually desirable becomes obvious in light of these admonitions.

The proper Bahá'í perspective on this issue may be summarized from the Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh: *“Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other.”*¹⁵

If a person allows their perspective of personal preference to endure, it must eventually produce the inaccurate belief that one knows more, understands more or is smarter than others. Consequently this makes everyone else's beliefs, attitudes and behavior appear wrong, unless they conform with one's own. 'Abdu'l-Bahá confirms the disunifying outcome of such a belief when He says: *“The fact that we imagine ourselves to be right and everybody else wrong is the greatest of all obstacles in the path towards unity...”*¹⁶

When this attitude endures it inevitably gets expressed in an attempt to control the thinking or behavior of others who may be participants in any given group of people. If we believe ourselves to be right and everyone else wrong, we might consequently assume the right to forcefully influence or control the beliefs and behavior of others to conform with our own. This aspiration for **control** or **power** over others, branching from the root of self-superiority, is the cause of much disunity.

War, the most violent example of disunity, is an attempt by one group to control another by aggressive, brutal force. This terribly destructive expression of control and disunity is being systematically eliminated in the world through the process of peacemaking by the governments and peoples of the world. This will inevitably result in the advent of what Bahá'u'lláh refers to as the “Lesser Peace.” Although war is the most extreme example, even the lesser forms of disunity display an attempt to control the thoughts or behavior of others. These lesser forms include contention, conflict, discord, strife and sedition, and are likewise *“forbidden in the Book of God.”*¹⁷ Bahá'u'lláh clarifies His decree to abolish **all** forms of disunity when He says: *“Whatsoever hath led the children of men to shun one another, and hath caused dissensions and divisions amongst them, hath, through the revelation of these words been nullified and abolished.”*¹⁸ And again: *“The distinguishing feature that marketh the preeminent character of this Supreme Revelation consisteth in that We have, on the one hand, blotted out from the pages of God's holy Book whatsoever hath been the cause of strife, of malice and mischief amongst the children of men, and have, on the other, laid down the essential prerequisites of concord, of understanding, of complete and enduring unity.”*¹⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains further: *“O ye beloved of the Lord! In this sacred Dispensation, conflict and contention are in no wise permitted. Every aggressor deprives himself of God's grace.”*²⁰

The lesser and more subtle forms of disunity get expressed in the form of disagreement or contentious quarreling (dissension); opposing, antagonistic or competitive action (conflict); exertion or contention for superiority (strife); or assertively maintaining a position in an argument or debate (contention).

These kind of **power plays**, when displayed at Feasts, Conventions, Spiritual Assembly meetings, committee meetings or other group functions, can significantly affect the unity of our Faith. These forms of disunity frustrate our community consultative process and are definite barriers to our unity.

Disunity in a Bahá'í community, then, can be caused when an individual attempts to make someone else's thought, perspective, idea, behavior, action, support, vote or opinion comply with his own. This effort to control others may be attempted through the many forms of aggressive action as indicated above. It is the assumption of self-superiority and its resulting desire to control, however minute it may be, communicated through physical, verbal or emotional force or control, that denigrates, intimidates, belittles, oppresses and separates people. In its message to the Bahá'ís of the world dated 26 November 1992, the Universal

House of Justice reminds us of the destructive nature of disunity: *“Disunity is the crux of the problems which so severely afflict the planet. It permeates attitudes in all departments of life. It is at the heart of all major conflicts between nations and peoples. More serious still, disunity is common in the relations between religions and within religions, vitiating the very spiritual and moral influence which it is their primary purpose to exert.”*²¹

It must be clarified here that this sense of self-superiority is rarely even noticed by any one of us when we express it, primarily because we are not conscious of it existing within ourselves. In other words, we behave in ways that are expressions of superiority and don't even know it. Additionally, if we behave this way we are often unaware that our words or actions cause pain to others and are thereby disunifying. It is most often an *“inherent and at times subconscious sense of superiority,”*²² as identified by the Guardian, culturally taught and often reinforced by family, friends, associates, class, religion, race, culture, schools, media, political policies or all of the above, that can make us believe we are thinking and behaving in an acceptable way when, in fact, what might be acceptable socially is often inconsistent with Bahá'í teachings. It is this social programming that becomes the barrier to our attempt at harmony and peace. This is what creates our prejudices of others' thoughts and behavior, resulting in racism, chauvinism, nationalism, classism, and all of the other divisive “isms” that make people subconsciously think they are in some way better than others. This is what makes it so hard to change. When something is subconscious it means we are unaware of it. The purpose of this investigation is to point out how these behaviors can affect our unity and also to identify some indicators that alert us to such behaviors so that we may become conscious of their effects and hopefully make efforts to change.

The other cause of disunity, which was pointed out earlier as having no underlying sense of self-superiority, is merely an unawareness that the way we communicate can be aggressive and hurtful to others. The solution to this source of disunity can be relatively simple in that, with effort, better communication skills can be learned and practiced which can eradicate any disunity quite rapidly.

It must be pointed out that most of the time, specifically in the Bahá'í community, disunity caused by insensitive communication, or by behavior or words that unintentionally cause pain to others, is usually **motivated**, not by an intent to hurt, but by an intense love for Bahá'u'lláh and His Faith. That is, the love we Bahá'ís have for this Faith is so great that our enthusiasm and zeal often overstep moderation and unintentionally result in disunity. It is important to know that the motive is pure and that such behavior is usually not motivated by selfishness or a desire for power. The Universal House of Justice enlightened us on this when it noted: *“Such tendencies (of the friends to criticize each other at the slightest provocation) are of course motivated by a deep love for the Faith, a desire to see it free of any flaw.”*²³

When we understand that most of the time love is the motive behind the disunifying actions of those seeking to influence what they believe to be right Bahá'í thinking or behavior, we are set free from blaming others for being selfish, or from feeling extremely guilty ourselves for perpetrating such behavior. This undesirable behavior is simply an immature expression of our desire to see things change for the better.

Victims who experience painful words or actions from another are obliged to refrain from assuming the motive of the perpetrator or making any judgments against him. We can never know the motive of another soul, nor is it acceptable to assume. Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian all exemplified the proper attitude for us. The motives of believers who caused disunity were never assumed to be wicked or evil unless and until they overtly broke the Covenant and sought to destroy it. We too who experience hurtful words or actions from our fellow believers, can make an effort to overcome our suspicious

urge to judge their motives and remain assured that all Bahá'ís are motivated by love and a desire for what is good. Our unity depends on it.

If any one of us are perpetrators of disunity, on the other hand, we have the obligation to search our souls and make every effort to purify our motives and readjust our behavior and words so as to be sure they are perceived as loving and caring.

An understanding of the four stages of the process of love helps us appreciate our true nature and allows for the development of a more profound expression of our love for Bahá'u'lláh and His Faith. Additionally, it helps us realize that even an action stemming from a pure motive can be disunifying if not tempered with wisdom.

The first stage in the process of love is one of infatuation with something or someone and may be verbalized as “I like.” We all experienced this stage of love when we first became attracted to this Faith, or when attracted to another person or even a material object. The heart hears this “I like” and sets out to investigate further. If the “I like” becomes strong enough, the love advances to the second stage, expressed as “I want.” At this point the love becomes so strong the heart will do anything to possess the new loved one or the new loved object, whatever the case may be. Once possession takes place the heart believes that the new loved one is now “mine”: my wife, my car, my house, etc. This is the third stage in the process of love. It is evident we have arrived at this stage of love in the Faith when we say, “**My** religion is the Bahá'í Faith.” It is at this third stage of love where problems with control can begin. Once we own this Faith there may develop a desire to control it and its members for fear they might harm it in some way. It is at this third stage that we may cause the most disunity, because our love is immature. If we are fortunate we will overcome the desire to control everything we love and progress to a stage of **detachment**, in which we release control over the ones we love and set them free to choose how to believe and behave. This is the station of love to which Bahá'u'lláh is calling us — to love our brothers and sisters, our Faith, our children, our friends, our spouses with detachment. He teaches us to let go and not attempt to control the thinking or behavior of others by force, but rather, if we influence them at all, to do so by demonstrating the truth in exemplary action.

Causing disunity, even when our actions are motivated by love, can thus result either from an “*inherent and at times subconscious sense of superiority*”, or from communicating in ways that are hurtful to others. Both get expressed as attempts to control or influence others in ways that actually interfere with our beloved desire for unity.

TWO HELPFUL PERSPECTIVES

To prevent disunity, it is necessary for us to continually monitor our own attitudes and interactions with others for signs of self-superiority that may linger in our hearts and minds, and make constant efforts to control these negative attitudes and actions. A more complete implementation of two fundamental principles of our Faith will help us do this.

The first is a genuine attitude of unconditional acceptance and love of one another, an ancient fundamental principle of all religions. When a person chooses to behave in any given way, we as individuals have no choice or right, if we are going to be unified, but to accept that person and his behavior, without reproach of any kind. Anything less than this opens the door for fault-finding, blame, reproof and revenge, all of which are forbidden to us. The Bahá'í Writings strongly discourage us from expressing personal concern with

what we perceive as inappropriate behavior of others. Bahá'u'lláh instructs us clearly, saying: *“Breathe not the sins of others so long as thou art thyself a sinner.”*²⁴ And: *“How couldst thou forget thine own faults and busy thyself with the faults of others? Whoso doeth this is accursed of Me.”*²⁵

It is very important to realize that it is not our duty, nor our right, to **fix** other people, even though we may be sympathetic to another's pain and want to see him rid of it.

When we consider unity and the prerequisites for its presence, we find that Bahá'u'lláh has identified a specific truth which allows this fundamental religious principle of unconditional acceptance of others to flourish. A study of His Writings suggests the path to unity is found in the knowledge that *“He doeth whatsoever He willeth and ordaineth whatsoever He pleaseth.”*²⁶ Therefore, God has ordained that people have the choice to be who they are and are allowed to behave as they choose, and we are to accept this truth. Unity, then, exists to the extent that our actions manifest our understanding of God's decree to leave the behavior and actions of others in His hands. Whatever happens in our lives, be it caused by the actions or inaction's of others, even if such actions are in violation of the Divine Teachings, is of God Himself. Acquiring a thorough understanding that *“He doth what He willeth, ordaineth what He pleaseth”* is, according to Bahá'u'lláh, *“the apex of consciousness and the secret of divine guidance,”* and *“the station of God's immutable decree, His foreordained mystery.”*²⁷ If we choose to interfere with the actions of others, especially if it is with aggression, are we not disputing God's decree? Bahá'u'lláh elaborates on this principle and confirms its relationship to unity: *“O servants! Let not the means of order be made the cause of confusion and the instrument of union an occasion for discord. We fain would hope that the people of Bahá may be guided by the blessed words: ‘Say: all things are of God.’ This exalted utterance is like unto water for quenching the fire of hate and enmity which smouldereth within the hearts and breasts of men. By this single utterance contending peoples and kindreds will attain the light of true unity.”*²⁸ Again, contemplate the following from Bahá'u'lláh and consider how vital this perspective is to unity. He says: *“Revile ye not one another. We, verily, have come to unite and weld together all that dwell on earth. Unto this beareth witness what the ocean of Mine utterance hath revealed amongst men, and yet most of the people have gone astray. If anyone revile you, or trouble touch you, in the path of God, be patient, and put your trust in Him Who heareth, Who seeth. He, in truth, witnesseth, and perceiveth, and **doeth what He pleaseth**, through the power of His sovereignty. He, verily, is the Lord of strength, and of might. In the Book of God, the Mighty, the Great, ye have been forbidden to engage in contention and conflict.”*²⁹ The Báb affirmed this principle in His prayer for removing difficulties when He wrote: *“All are His servants, and all abide by His bidding!”*³⁰ This perspective, when perceived as reality in our lives, bars the door to all uninvited involvement in the behavior of others. Consider how imperative it is that this ancient fundamental verity of religion be nurtured in our hearts and minds if unity is to reign in our community.

The second fundamental Bahá'í principle that is necessary for an environment of unity is an understanding that truth is relative.³¹ When this principle is more clearly comprehended — specifically as it applies to the various consultative environments at Feasts, Conventions, Spiritual Assembly meetings, etc.— it leaves no room for self-superiority to exist in the consultative experience.

When one accepts the principle of relative truth, he is enabled to detach himself from his own opinion and see it as just one perspective of the many thousands that may exist on any issue. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá states: *“He who expresses an opinion should not voice it as correct and right but set it forth as a contribution to the consensus of opinion.”*³² It is this state of detachment from one's own opinion that opens the door to unity. In this condition

of being one knows that his own perspective **on any given issue** is relevant to his own unique development of that perspective. In the context of consultation, a person can initially understand an issue only from his own perspective, which is significantly influenced by his unique genetic make-up, his personal interpretation and integration of parental, environmental and educational influences, as well as his personal experiences and choices. These differing aspects of each individual make truth relative to each of us, relative, that is, to the conditions that make up our own personal perspective. It is this realization — that each of us has just a “slice of the pie of truth” and that the greater truth is when all of the “slices” are integrated — that allows us to begin to experience consultation which moves us into the Valley of Unity, where *“with the ear of God he heareth, with the eye of God he beholdeth the mysteries of divine creation.”*³³ It is this perspective — where we see with the eye of God, where we view our own opinions from a distance, giving them no more and no less weight or truth than anyone else’s — that enables unity to exist and a more complete understanding of truth to emerge. Anything less than this expresses an attitude of superiority, however slight it might be, resulting in some form of disunity. Remember ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement: *“The fact that we **imagine ourselves to be right and everybody else wrong is the greatest of all obstacles in the path towards unity.**”*³⁴

Integrating these two basic principles into our lives deters our concern about, and our interference with, how others choose to conduct their lives or view various issues. How critical this is to unity, especially when we consider how such interference hurts, abuses, repulses and harms other souls.

RED FLAGS OF DISUNITY

Unity and disunity are conditions that can be expressed only in the context of human relationships, and, clearly, **communication** is the bridge by which these relationships exist. Communication between people or groups is expressed in many ways and may include verbal expression; a variety of tone, volume or pace in such verbal expression; facial expressions; body language; emotional expression such as laughter, crying or sighing; and other blatant or subtle physical actions or behavior. The dynamics of communication require an examination and understanding if we are to learn how to identify within ourselves those feelings and expressions that signal our potential to be causes of disunity, however unintentional those expressions may be. Recognizing the **RED FLAGS** of disunity within ourselves is fundamental to our pursuit of a unified Bahá’í community. Let’s now take a look at some behaviors that have become socially acceptable in the West, but which are in fact disunifying and harmful.

The following discussion on the red flags of disunity is applicable both to disunity which stems from a subconscious perspective of self-superiority as well as disunity originating from an overzealous love that may be communicated in ways that are unintentionally aggressive and hurtful.

Please be alert to this bit of caution. These **RED FLAGS** are indicators **within ourselves** that **we** are at risk of being a cause of disunity. Once a person becomes aware of them, however, it is naturally easier to recognize them in others. Remember: We are to regard each other with a sin-covering eye. Great care is required if we are going to investigate the causes of disunity and remain focused on correcting our own behavior and not fall into the trap of criticizing the behavior of others.

THE RED FLAG OF ANGER

One of the most evident **RED FLAGS** of disunity is **the feeling of anger within ourselves**. The emotion of anger most often demands its expression in aggressive action, either verbally or physically, within ourselves or towards others.

This feeling of anger may stem from our disapproval of, or disgust with, the action or inaction of the believers or an institution of the Cause. Anger is **always** dissatisfaction with the way things are, the way someone behaves, or the way we perceive or imagine something might turn out. It is an expression of “I want things to be different” carried beyond a reasonable concern. It is one of the best inward signs that we are in conflict with God’s Will and are at risk of being a cause of disunity. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá confirms this perspective in a letter to an individual in which He says: *“Let nothing grieve thee, and **be thou angered at none. It behoveth thee to be content with the Will of God, and a true and loving and trusted friend to all the peoples of the earth, without any exceptions whatever. This is the quality of the sincere, the way of the saints, the emblem of those who believe in the unity of God, and the raiment of the people of Bahá.**”*³⁵

Disappointment in or disapproval of another’s behavior may instead be better expressed as a feeling of sorrow. Sorrow, sometimes referred to as the “healing feeling,” may be the more mature spiritual response to our disappointment in others. Bahá’u’lláh Himself expresses no anger in His Writings at His disappointment in the actions of the friends, but rather expresses sorrow: *“My sorrows are for those who have involved themselves in their corrupt passions, and claim to be associated with the Faith of God, the Gracious, the All-Praised.”*³⁶ And again: *“Nay, My sorrows are occasioned by those who claim to be related to Me and yet commit that which causeth the voice of My lamentations to be lifted up and My tears to flow.”*³⁷ Research in the field of feelings and emotions suggests that our feelings are an emotional expression of our mental perspective, either conscious or subconscious, on any given issue or incident. Might this suggest that a perspective on an issue which evokes anger is inaccurate when viewed in light of God’s purpose for humans? Does this suggest that a concern over the inappropriate behavior of others — a concern which evokes sorrow instead of anger — may be a more mature response?

This may seem like an unrealistic standard, given the degree to which the expression of anger is considered unavoidable, and even healthy, in today’s society. However, anger, like all emotions, does not arise directly from the actions of others. It arises from our developed perspectives about those actions. This is obvious when we consider that any given action may provoke anger in one person while eliciting laughter in another and indifference or pity in someone else, depending on how each person regards that action. This is a very empowering truth because it means we don’t have to be slaves to our emotions. By using the Holy Word and prayer to modify our perspectives, we actually control our emotions without suppressing them. This approach allows us to replace an unhealthy emotion like anger with an equally powerful but far more constructive emotion like sorrow and therefore opens up avenues for more appropriate responses.

Anger can sometimes be expressed during consultation in an attempt to emphasize our opinion, that we might control the action or opinions of others. This unfortunate **power play** is always disunifying and is unsuitable in the Bahá’í community or in most any other relationship. Vigilantly guarding ourselves from its destructive nature is imperative if unity is to exist. One solution is to remain consciously aware of our feelings so that when anger surges through our minds and bodies, we can endeavor to convert it to sorrow through the power of understanding and by God’s grace. (Just a note here. This does not suggest we suppress anger when it appears within ourselves, as this can be physically, emotionally and

mentally harmful. Rather, it is suggesting that anger is simply a lower-nature emotion which can be converted to an expression of sorrow through prayer and more mature understanding.)

Those of us who find ourselves expressing anger at the Bahá'ís in our communities might do well to consider this. Anger nearly always gets expressed as aggressive remarks or behavior and is extremely destructive to our unity and to the progress of the Faith. One could be correct on any given issue, but the expression of anger towards the friends negates the very things we are trying to do and **always** makes things worse. The ideas, programs and projects we want to initiate will have little or no effect in the absence of unity, and unity is impossible in the presence of anger.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá reminds us how we might deal with our own anger and exemplify unity: *“Be in perfect unity. Never become angry with one another....Love the creatures for the sake of God and not for themselves. You will never become angry or impatient if you love them for the sake of God. Humanity is not perfect. There are imperfections in every human being, and you will always become unhappy if you look toward the people themselves. But if you look toward God, you will love them and be kind to them, for the world of God is the world of perfection and complete mercy. Therefore, do not look at the shortcomings of anybody; see with the sight of forgiveness. The imperfect eye beholds imperfections. The eye that covers faults looks towards the Creator of souls. He created them, trains and provides for them, endows them with capacity and life, sight and hearing; therefore, they are the signs of His grandeur.”*³⁸

One major detriment of anger is the misleading influence it has on the members of any consultative group — a committee, a Spiritual Assembly, a Feast or Convention. When anger is expressed during such a meeting most people so abhor it they will do anything to relieve its presence. Many tend to avoid or even abandon the issue under consideration and immediately turn their attention to alleviating the anger by appeasing the angered person, even if it means disregarding a reasonable approach to a solution. This is contrary to good Bahá'í consultation, where issues are to be dealt with irrespective of the emotional overtones of contributing members. Shoghi Effendi suggests this principle when he states: *“And, when they are called upon to arrive at a certain decision, they should, after **dispassionate**, anxious and cordial consultation, turn to God in prayer.”*³⁹ Additionally, many people are so repulsed by the anger of others that they withhold their opinions on any given issue just to avoid triggering a potentially indignant response. We know that under these conditions the truth remains hidden and any hope for successful solutions remains impaired.

It is very important to understand that people feel hurt, attacked, intimidated and belittled by angry remarks directed at them. It makes no difference if one thinks they shouldn't feel hurt; they do. Those who feel hurt by such angry remarks are not the cause of nor are they contributors to disunity. They, and all the others present, become victims of it! Bahá'u'lláh reminds us: *“Strife and conflict befit the beasts of the wild. It was through the grace of God and with the aid of seemly words and praiseworthy deeds that the unsheathed swords of the Bábí community were returned to their scabbards. Indeed through the power of good words, the righteous have always succeeded in winning command over the meads of the hearts of men. Say, O ye loved ones! Do not forsake prudence. Incline your hearts to the counsels given by the Most Exalted Pen and **beware lest your hands or tongues cause harm unto anyone among mankind.**”*⁴⁰

‘Abdu’l-Bahá does caution us not to feel hurt when another offers an opposing opinion during consultation: *“The members thereof must take counsel together in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise. This can be attained when every member*

expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should any one oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed."⁴¹ We can infer from this that feeling hurt by the differences of opinions or arguments from another would be an inappropriate response. This does not seem to imply, however, we are not to feel hurt by angry or aggressive remarks. It is natural and normal to feel hurt after experiencing any kind of verbal abuse. There is a definite difference between opposing opinions or arguments, and angry, aggressive or manipulative comments. The former is simply the expression of a different perspective on an issue and is not an attack on a person, whereas the latter always oppresses others, whether intentionally or not.

Victims of anger can and do contribute to the eventual elimination of anger from a group, but neither by aggressively defending themselves from a perpetrator, nor by submissively complying to his whims. Anger is, instead, best combated by refusing to be affected by, or yielding to, the manipulative tactics of an aggressor.

When one member of a consultative group expresses anger, it is important for the other members to make every effort to diffuse the effects of the power play of anger by mentally setting aside the angry response and remaining focused on the issue. This is how victims can assist in recreating unity: by striving to remain unaffected by the anger of others and focusing on the issue alone. This diffuses the power play and keeps the conflict from escalating. This aloof response to anger usurps the **power** of the perpetrator, who may become even angrier, or may leave and search for victims elsewhere, or, hopefully, will realize the ineffectiveness of his anger and cease. The effectiveness of this strategy has been consistently demonstrated by nonviolent individuals and groups the world over, both within the Bahá'í community and in the society at large.

The spiritual principles of the Faith encourage any victims of anger or aggression, even when the anger or aggression comes from within our own ranks, to persevere in service, endure with patience and remain steadfast under all conditions. To withdraw from continued service, community involvement or administrative requirements only prolongs the eventual recovery from disunity. Consider this statement from Bahá'u'lláh: *"Wert thou to consider this world, and realize how fleeting are the things that pertain unto it, thou wouldst choose to tread no path except the path of service to the Cause of thy Lord. None would have the power to deter thee from celebrating His praise, though all men should arise to oppose thee. Go thou straight on and persevere in His service."*⁴²

As was pointed out earlier much of this behavior is motivated by an intense love for Bahá'u'lláh and His Faith. There could be, however, a slim percentage motivated by a selfish desire for power and authority. One has to wonder if the meek, the humble and the silent are required to endure the abuse of the few angered self-righteous, as experienced by religions in the past. We are assured by 'Abdu'l-Bahá that if they are, it won't be indefinitely: *"The worst enemies of the Cause are in the Cause and mention the Name of God. We need not fear the enemies on the outside for such can be easily dealt with. But the enemies who call themselves friends and who persistently violate every fundamental law of love and unity, are difficult to be dealt with in this day, for the mercy of God is great. But ere long this merciful door will be closed and such enemies will be attacked with a madness."*⁴³

Imagine for a moment, what it would be like to live in a community where there is no anger. What a delight it would be to attend Feast! Envision Spiritual Assembly meetings, committee meetings, Conventions and all other community meetings and activities devoid of anger! What a joy it would be to experience this on a consistent basis! Consider the

potential of our teaching projects when seekers witness such an abundance of unity that they become irresistibly moved to join this community!

THE RED FLAG OF ADVISING

Another **RED FLAG** that can alert us to imminent disunity is when we find ourselves **analyzing, advising and sermonizing to each other. Giving unsolicited advice** to others presupposes our own superiority and again is divisive. In order to advise anyone, we must first assume that “I know, but you don’t know,” otherwise there is no need to give advice.

Most of the time the motive to advise others stems from a sincere desire to help and is therefore pure. Often Bahá’ís see people who have problems and want to fix them, see ignorance and want to educate, see others lost and want to guide them. None of these are harmful motives, but the advising is intimidating if it is not first genuinely requested by the ones we are trying to help, or if they have not clearly welcomed it. That is, don’t advise someone until there is a confirmed desire for the advice, or you can be sure you will be alienating that person when you think you are helping. Let’s explore this.

The tendency for individuals to advise each other can be significantly disunifying to our relationships in this Cause. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi considers this subject: *“The greatest need it seems everywhere inside the Cause is to impress upon the friends the need for love among them. There is a tendency to mix up the functions of the Administration and try to apply it in individual relationships, which is abortive, because the Assembly is a nascent House of Justice and is supposed to administer, according to the Teachings, the affairs of the Community. But individuals towards each other are governed by love, unity, forgiveness and a sin-covering eye. Once the friends grasp this they will get along much better, but they keep playing Spiritual Assembly to each other and expect the Assembly to behave like an individual.”*⁴⁴

A common time we could inappropriately instruct others is on a community level during Feast or Convention when we stand up and advise the believers on the proper way to believe or behave. There are two specific times when individuals are called upon to give advice: as community members to the Local Spiritual Assembly during the Nineteen Day Feast, and as delegates to the National Spiritual Assembly during Convention. **Neither of these is a time to advise individuals or the community!** They are both times to make suggestions and recommendations to institutions of the Cause. This subject is dealt with at length in a message from the Universal House of Justice to the followers of Bahá’u’lláh in the United States of America, published in a booklet entitled: Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá’u’lláh.

Another time we might inappropriately advise one another is in general conversation with other believers. Many people just want to talk and share their lives with others without being advised how to conduct themselves. The proper time for advising individuals may be only when they request it. Even then, great care and wisdom are called for.

This tendency to advise one another can be identified when we find ourselves using control phrases such as: “you **should**,” “you **must**,” “you’re **supposed to**,” “you’d **better**,” “we **need to**,” “you have **got to**,” “we **have to**,” or “you **ought to**.” These phrases imply an “I know, you don’t,” position and are **RED FLAGS** that warn of our potential to be a cause of disunity. When interpreting one of Bahá’u’lláh’s Tablets in The Revelation of

Bahá'u'lláh, Adib Taherzadeh writes: “Bahá'u'lláh exhorts His followers to shun any word which might become the cause of disunity, even if such a word is uttered by those who are closest to Him and continually circle the throne of His sovereignty.”⁴⁵

An applicable skill is to monitor our own language and when we perceive ourselves considering the use of these phrases in our discussions or while consulting with others, we stop! Humbling ourselves, we may instead share our perspective as ‘Abdu'l-Bahá suggests: “Here these things are before us...” Or perhaps: “Another perspective is...,” “One understanding is...,” or “Another view is...” When stated in one of these ways it becomes an **offered perspective**, as opposed to an authoritative, insistent or opinionated statement which using the control phrases listed above would imply.

There is a time and place for the use of control phrases. This option is primarily restricted to those individuals and institutions endowed with the authority to advise and instruct. These include the Central Figures of the Faith, the Faith’s institutions, and the individuals who represent these institutions, such as those authorized by the Universal House of Justice, National Spiritual Assemblies and Local Spiritual Assemblies. The Counselor members of the Continental Boards of Counselors, the Auxiliary Board members and their assistants are all authorized to give advice as well. However, even the institutions of the Faith are advised by the Universal House of Justice “to be mindful that the authority they wield must in general be expressed with love, humility and a genuine respect for others.”⁴⁶ This suggests even the institutions are to be guarded in their speech and selective in their demeanor and presentation.

This proposal does not suggest that when one Bahá'í advises another, he is wrong in the advice given. Quite the contrary. One’s many years of experience or profound understanding of the Writings may make what one is saying right. The concern here is not whether it is right or not, but how it affects those it is said to. ‘Abdu'l-Bahá clearly instructs us on this matter: “...and if you wish to give admonition or advice, let it be offered in such a way that it will not burden the bearer. Turn all your thoughts toward bringing joy to hearts. Beware! Beware! lest ye offend any heart.”⁴⁷

In consideration of this issue ‘Abdu'l-Bahá clearly imparts an additional spiritual principle when He wrote: “If they agree upon a subject, even though it be wrong, it is better than to disagree and be in the right, for this difference will produce the demolition of the divine foundation. Though one of the parties may be in the right and they disagree that will be the cause of a thousand wrongs, but if they agree and both parties are in the wrong, as it is in unity the truth will be revealed and the wrong made right.”⁴⁸ This indicates that unity is a greater priority than being right! If advising others imposes on our unity it is preferable to forgo it, even if the advice is correct.

The same principle applies to our concern for justice as it does for “rightness.” We could, for the sake of justice, insist on a perspective and attempt to enforce an opinion or control the behavior of others for a specific outcome that we perceive as being “just.” No doubt justice holds a high priority in our affairs as is expressed in the Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh: “The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice.”⁴⁹ However, justice is secondary to the primary requirement, which is the desire for unity, a principle revealed by Bahá'u'lláh when He said: “The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men.”⁵⁰ Again we find unity taking precedence over other highly valued principles that guide our lives as Bahá'ís.

Inappropriately advising the community or individuals can cause the believers to withdraw and refrain from being involved. They may feel intimidated, denigrated, belittled, shamed, blamed or hurt in other ways. Bahá'u'lláh instructs us to communicate differently, saying: “Show forbearance and benevolence and love to one another. Should

anyone among you be incapable of grasping a certain truth, or be striving to comprehend it, show forth, when conversing with him, a spirit of extreme kindness and good-will. Help him to see and recognize the truth, without esteeming yourself to be, in the least, superior to him, or to be possessed of greater endowments."⁵¹ Later in the same passage He relates this issue to unity in these terms: *"Nothing whatever can, in this Day, inflict a greater harm upon this Cause than dissension and strife, contention, estrangement and apathy, among the loved ones of God."*⁵²

'Abdu'l-Bahá elaborates on how we might offer our perspective to another or others: *"In accordance with the divine teachings in this glorious dispensation we should not belittle anyone and call him ignorant, saying: 'You know not, but I know'. Rather, we should look upon others with respect, and when attempting to explain and demonstrate, we should speak as if we are investigating the truth, saying: 'Here these things are before us. Let us investigate to determine when and in what form the truth can be found.' The teacher should not consider himself as learned and others ignorant. Such a thought breedeth pride, and pride is not conducive to influence. The teacher should not see in himself any superiority; he should speak with the utmost kindness, lowliness and humility, for such speech exerteth influence and educateth the souls."*⁵³

A believer who exemplified a disassociation from his opinion was the early Bahá'í scholar, Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl, who 'Abdu'l-Bahá said was *"perfect from every direction."* *"During all the days of his life,"* 'Abdu'l-Bahá continues, *"I never heard from him the use of the word 'I—I said so,' or 'I wrote so and so.' He would say: 'This servant requested them,' or 'This servant begged the believers.' ...No one inhaled from him the odor of superiority."*⁵⁴ This may suggest that our use of such terms in our consultation as "I think," "I feel," or "I believe" is to be avoided as well, since their use may imply our attachment to an idea instead of offering another perspective for group consideration.

Additionally, we often use misleading statements that presume facts which may not be true — such as: "we think," "they believe," or "Bahá'ís feel." Rarely do we know how others think, feel or believe, nor do we have the right to express the assumptions these phrases imply.

There are two apparent reasons Bahá'ís sometimes find themselves inappropriately advising others. One of them possibly develops from the following thinking process. Bahá'ís believe God is all-knowing and all-wise and that Bahá'u'lláh is the Mouthpiece of God for this age. We faithfully know He is endowed with divine authority and therefore everything He says is true. If we study the Writings thoroughly, we may develop a tendency to believe that we too know a lot about the truth. The more we think we know about the truth the more the tendency is to advise others, who we may then assume know less. This can be one of the greatest tests that haunt seasoned or well-versed believers and it can be a challenging concept for those of us who have become accustomed to imposing our unsolicited advice freely upon the community. Nevertheless, until this issue is fully resolved we run the risk of hampering our unity.

The second reason we sometimes find ourselves advising from an assumed position of authority is primarily due to the influence of Western culture. Westerners are taught that leadership and influence are achieved by individuals who acquire the ability to successfully enforce their opinions and desires on others. A true leader, in Western terms, just steps in and, by physical force, threats, manipulative tactics, coercion, blackmail, bribery or intimidation, usurps the leadership, rallies the mob and carries out some fantastic feat that couldn't have been done without him. This leadership style is prevalent in Western politics, business and society in general, which encourages and rewards self-pride and greed for power and control. The Western culture is fast becoming the abode of the selfish

and the disunified. The unity of our Bahá'í community is constantly threatened by this disunifying influence, a condition possibly prophesied by Bahá'u'lláh when He spoke of the great convulsion to come, stating: *"The hour is approaching when the most great convulsion will have appeared. I swear by Him Who is the Truth! It shall cause separation to afflict everyone, even those who circle around Me."*⁵⁵

Those of us who grow up in this misguided environment learn that force and coercion are the ways to power and persuasion. Bahá'u'lláh teaches us differently, saying: *"Humility exalteth man to the heaven of glory and power, whilst pride abaseth him to the depths of wretchedness and degradation."*⁵⁶ And again: *"Verily, through meekness, man is elevated to the heaven of power; and again, pride degrades him to the lowest station of humiliation and abasement."*⁵⁷

From this it might be gleaned that the power Bahá'u'lláh is speaking about is the power to influence people through integrity, whereas the power mentioned previously, as expressed by Western culture, is the power to influence through force. The one inspires people to change by their own free will, the other imposes change by coercion, usurping their free will to choose how to think and behave. Again, the Báb revealed the spiritual approach to guiding or influencing others when He wrote: *"The path to guidance is one of love and compassion, not of force and coercion. This hath been God's method in the past, and shall continue to be in the future!"*⁵⁸

Bahá'u'lláh, with all His power and influence, expresses extreme meekness and humility, even when referring to His own glorious station of Divinity: *"O Shaykh! This station is the station in which one dieth to himself and liveth in God. Divinity, whenever I mention it, indicateth My complete and absolute self-effacement. This is the station in which I have no control over mine own weal or woe nor over my life nor over my resurrection."*⁵⁹

'Abdu'l-Bahá also demonstrated an extraordinary power to influence souls, and did so with notable humility. Howard Colby Ives, a Unitarian Clergyman who became a Bahá'í, wrote about his experiences with 'Abdu'l-Bahá during His visit to America. His observations capture the influential, yet humble nature of the Master: *"Who was this Man? Why did He have such power over souls? He made no pretensions of goodness. He did not preach; oh, never! Not even by the faintest implication did He ever intimate that one should be otherwise than what he was: yet somehow He showed us worlds of beauty and grandeur which tore our hearts with longing to attain..."*⁶⁰ Again he wrote: *"There was never an assumption of authority, rather He was ever the personification of humility. He taught 'as if offering a gift to a king.' He never told me what I should do, beyond suggesting that what I was doing was right. Nor did He ever tell me what I should believe. He made Truth and Love so beautiful and royal that the heart perforce did reverence. He showed me by His voice, manner, bearing, smile, how I should be, knowing that out of the pure soil of being the good fruit of deeds and words would surely spring.*

*"There was a strange, awe-inspiring mingling of humility and majesty, relaxation and power in His slightest word or gesture which made me long to understand its source. What made Him so different, so immeasurably superior to any other man I had ever met?"*⁶¹

It is vitally important to understand how disunifying it can be to offer unsolicited advice to others. It is so critical to be aware of this and accept how intimidating it is to the ones being advised, even if it isn't true for ourselves. This is especially serious when considering the effect it has on new believers and the youth in our communities.

Imagine if you will what contrast a unified Bahá'í community would offer set against the backdrop of this blatantly disunified society. Wouldn't the Bahá'í community become such a center of attraction as to cause the masses to want to be a part of it? Isn't sacrificing our inclination to advise others worth the gain of a more profound unity? 'Abdu'l-Bahá reminds us: "...if unity be gained, all other problems will disappear of themselves."⁶²

So far we have identified two **RED FLAGS** that signal potential disunity: specifically, the feeling or expression of anger and the use of control phrases in advising. There are several other **RED FLAGS** of disunity worthy of our consideration.

THE RED FLAG OF PERFECTIONISM

Another cause of disunity can be the attitude of perfectionism in Bahá'í affairs. The drive to be perfect, while imposing our standard of perfection on others, is just another subtle disclosure of self-superiority. From a booklet titled, Learned Behavior Profiles: "*Perfectionists are locked in a world of 'not enough.' Their dedication to quality exceeds all reasonable standards. Consequently, no matter how hard they work on a task, the results are never good enough because they are not perfect. With perfection as their goal, perfectionists are set up always to fail, always to feel that they need to try harder. Unfortunately, this criterion of perfection is applied not only to the individual himself or herself but to everyone. It is not possible for anyone to satisfy the expectations of a perfectionist, and most others are not willing to be subjected to such intense scrutiny. As a result, the perfectionist remains apart in a solitary world of fault finding and blame.*"⁶³ Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá both call on us to strive for perfection.⁶⁴ It is, however, the high priority placed on unity that restrains unreasonable perfectionism and prevents it from becoming so important that it results in fault-finding, blame and anger. The Universal House of Justice reminds us: "*The Cause is not so fragile that a degree of mistakes cannot be tolerated.*"⁶⁵

The **RED FLAG** of perfectionism can be identified when one feels that the Bahá'ís can never do anything right or when one holds rigidly to his perspective of the letter of the law on every subject, issue or concern. 'Abdu'l-Bahá enlightens us on this when He says: "*Holding to the letter of the law is many times an indication of a desire for leadership...when some follow merely the hard and fixed letter of the law, they deprive it [the Revelation] of its elastic quality — the spirit — and endeavor to convert it into a hard instrument of inflexible qualities.*"⁶⁶ This "holding to the letter of the law," and unrealistic expectations of perfection in all matters, inevitably leads to disunity. If we tend to expect undue perfectionism, might we sincerely consider the value of a more moderate approach? Isn't unrealistic perfectionism worth sacrificing for a more noble environment of unity?

THE RED FLAG OF EXCESSIVE SPEECH

One of the more evident **RED FLAGS** of disunity is talking too much or disproportionately at Bahá'í consultative meetings. This too can stem from a desire to control others and is expressed in an attempt to dominate a conversation or its outcome. This is most apparent during the consultative segment of our various community activities. Bahá'u'lláh warns of this: *“For the tongue is a smoldering fire, and excess of speech a deadly poison.”*⁶⁷

Speaking excessively, either by commenting on everybody else's comments, or by commenting on nearly every issue, or by elaborating on a subject at every Feast or at every meeting, often denies others the opportunity to express their views and can deprive the group of diverse input. When consultation is controlled by the few, even if those few have good intentions and ideas, the many find little value in the experience, and not having the option to contribute, may discontinue attendance. A guiding principle may be to speak only when we have something to say that is different or **significantly adds** to the consultation. This can help prevent the unnecessary repetition of ideas, the time-consuming tendency to approve of others' perspectives, and the domination of the consultation by the few. Bahá'u'lláh reminds us: *“Every word is endowed with a spirit, therefore the speaker or expounder should carefully deliver his words at the appropriate time and place, for the impression which each word maketh is clearly evident and perceptible. The Great Being saith: One word may be likened unto fire, another unto light, and the influence which both exert is manifest in the world.”*⁶⁸

The **RED FLAG** of excessive speech may be identified simply by counting the number of times one comments as compared to others in the group. Keeping such a tally is often quite revealing. If one finds oneself commenting two to three times more than anyone else, one has to ask, “Why is this happening? Do I think I know two to three times more than everyone else?” What other possible reason would explain such an imbalance of verbal expression? A sense of personal superiority, excessive zeal or one's simple unawareness of such an imbalance are the most apparent reasons. If the tally reveals that one is speaking considerably more than others, one can easily decrease one's comments accordingly. On the other hand if the tally reveals an imbalance, and one continues in spite of this awareness, one might well consider this as a serious **RED FLAG** of disunity.

It is vitally important to understand how difficult it is for others in the group to deal with this kind of power imbalance. How do we deal with someone who comments on nearly everything, summarizes everything, jumps in before others have the time to express their desire to be heard or whose comments are routinely very long? Surely this is a question worthy of serious consideration, especially when we know how such behavior can rob the others in a group of their freedom of expression, which opposes the fundamental principles of Bahá'í consultation. Excessive speech is one of those behaviors that interferes with *“unhampered consultation.”*⁶⁹ It may appear relatively harmless to a superficial observer, yet excessive speech is powerfully effective in manipulating the consultative process and is thus considerably undesirable.

Some may feel excessive speech is not a problem; they just expect others in the group to be more assertive expressing their opinions. But that's not the way most people function. There is good scientific evidence that women process information and express themselves differently than men. Cultural backgrounds as well significantly influence the way people express themselves. Not all people are ready to voice an opinion immediately after an issue or situation is introduced. They need time to arrange their thoughts and feelings before presenting their perspectives. But if more assertive people always respond first and dominate the time, the rest are never heard from. It seems that only vigilance over oneself, and sincere respect for the people who function differently in the consultative process, will be conducive to truly "unfettered" consultation.

As a side note, it is important to point out here that the use of stimulants such as caffeine during consultative meetings can seriously contribute to this excessive speech pattern as well.

Surely, unity is an environment where all are allowed to be heard, where the expression of all opinions is valued and respected, where the opportunity exists for all, in turn, to speak freely and openly. It is also an environment where participation by the many is enhanced, which significantly contributes to the feeling of belonging among those involved.

OTHER RED FLAGS

Talking loudly, with strong negative emotional overtones of anger, disgust or whining is another way to unfairly attempt to influence the group to **hear** one's opinion **more** than someone else's. This manipulative tactic is also a **RED FLAG**.

RED FLAGS of disunity can also be communicated through body language. Rolling our eyes, covering our faces, hanging our heads, sighing and walking out of the meeting room are all ways we may communicate our disapproval of another's opinion, action or behavior.

One **RED FLAG** that is very disheartening, yet can occur on occasion, is when one is so attached to his perspective on something that he threatens resignation if he doesn't get his way. Bahá'ís never want to see another believer resign from the Faith, or even discontinue active service. When another in the consultative group threatens to resign it seriously affects the decision making process of the group and can be powerfully manipulative. When this happens, the others in the group can only do their best to console the distraught individual while mentally setting the threat aside of their own considerations and continuing the best they can.

There are other threatening ways individuals may attempt to control a group. Threatening to withhold giving to the Fund if we don't like the ways the money is being spent or threatening to withhold support by not attending agreed upon activities are just

two other possibilities. Threats or ultimatums of any kind are obviously unacceptable in Bahá'í consultation. Those members of the group being threatened can best diffuse the threats by making serious efforts not to succumb to or be manipulated by them.

Everyone knows that supporting community events by participating in them can be both beneficial to us as individuals and to the collective body of the community. However, badgering individuals, or the community, to attend or support activities that we personally feel are most important is another behavior that is extremely disunifying. Exclaiming, "Everyone should attend," or "You must be there," or "You've got to do this," are attempts to coerce others into supporting activities that we personally find highly valuable, even when others may not. Remember the Báb's statement: "*The path to guidance is one of love and compassion, not of force and coercion. This hath been God's method in the past, and shall continue to be in the future!*"⁷⁰ Everyone prioritizes activities differently; this is our God given right. To impose our personal values upon others by using these "power phrases," even if we are right, frequently makes others feel guilty, foolish, defensive or belittled for not attending. To help build a united community it will be necessary for us to avoid this kind of badgering, and, instead, testify to the value of personally preferred activities without imposing our expectations upon others. Giving others the emotional freedom to support those activities which they find personally valuable is one of the vital elements for an environment of unity.

The House of Justice clearly emphasized "*...the necessity of the individual's participation in collective endeavours, such as community functions and projects,*" when it pointed out those components that are "*Fundamental to any effective response to the immediate challenges facing the community.*"⁷¹ The way we inspire greater participation in activities deserves serious consideration; however, badgering is neither effective nor appealing.

Another divisive element recognizable in communication might be termed, "**quote-beating.**" Often when we want to present our opinion emphatically we may use several quotations from the Writings to support our position. Relying on references from the Sacred Texts is necessary when considering any issue, but we can sometimes do this with excessive emphasis to **make a case** for our own opinions, and not in the spirit of a unified search for truth. Sometimes the quotes can be irrelevant to the matter at hand, may be personally interpreted, or are quoted out of context in a desperate attempt to bolster our position on an issue. Unfortunately, it often works. Many people respond to quote-beating with silence, because they don't want to appear as though they disagree with Bahá'u'lláh. Some may even feel they are not familiar enough with the Writings to offer an alternative view. Whatever the reason, this silent response prevents the truth from surfacing.

One very subtle yet distinct expression of superiority and disunity is "one-upping." This can happen during consultation, or when several people are just talking about various issues, and one person tells a story or shares an experience he has had and another steps in and follows with what he perceives as a "bigger" and "better" story or example. When such "one-upping" happens to us it is natural to sometimes feel intimidated. Repeated

incidences can eventually cause people to avoid the perpetrator — a distinct condition of disunity.

“One-upping” is most often perpetrated by older people on the young or the richer people upon the poor. The older and the more wealthy both have greater opportunities for sensational experiences and therefore it is a greater challenge for them to avoid this form of disunifying behavior.

The young and the poor are frequently harmed by “one-upping.” Those who haven’t experienced it usually have little knowledge of how it feels; it is not pleasant. Dealing with the issue surely requires sensitivity so as not to create separation or division among the friends. Again, the preponderance of the burden lies on the shoulders of the perpetrators of this activity. This behavior, like many of the others previously discussed, is typically acceptable in Western society. Nonetheless, both the call to transformation and the desire for unity compel us to seriously consider the need for change.

“Let me take that just one step further” is also an intimidating statement to others and another **RED FLAG**. This statement implies that the person who made the original contribution either didn’t explain it fully or didn’t understand the issue completely, while implying that the person taking the issue “one step further” has a superior ability to perceive or express the truth. One might instead say: “May I add another thought?” or, “Your comment stimulated an additional thought for me.” Expressing oneself this way provides for further consultation without implying an incompleteness on another’s part.

These are just some of the more obvious **RED FLAGS** of disunity. There are more. Working hard to become aware of how these actions affect others and making prayerful efforts to change is primary to our desperately sought-after environment of unity.

THE ROLE OF VICTIMS

It would be unfair to focus all the attention on the perpetrator of acts of disunity when victims of power plays have a very significant and valuable role to play in creating unity as well. Both victims and bystanders can help eliminate power plays from a group and thereby enhance its unity. The role of both the victims and the innocent bystanders, once a power play has been initiated by an individual, is to diffuse the power play immediately. That is, if someone expresses anger, or uses control phrases, or threatens someone or the group, or does anything to exert power over the group, all the other members must, if they are going to diffuse the power play, be so detached that there is no perceptible response to the power play at all. In other words, when someone uses anger, I, as another member of the group, will not allow the anger to influence me nor will I react to the power play at all. This takes the power out of the power play and allows the group to continue without being victimized by the act. It is vitally important to understand: **Power plays have no power if no one responds to them.** This allows the group to disassociate from the anger and deal with the issue alone. The power play gets diffused, and, hopefully, the perpetrator becomes

aware of the impotence of the act and eventually ceases to use these harmful methods of influencing others.

The Universal House of Justice gives us definitive guidance that sets certain boundaries protecting us either from being a perpetrator of disunifying consultation or from responding as a victim: *“The second principle is that of detachment in consultation. The members of an Assembly must learn to express their views frankly, calmly, without passion or rancour. They must also learn to listen to the opinions of their fellow members without taking offense or belittling the views of another. Bahá’í consultation is not an easy process. It requires love, kindness, moral courage and humility. Thus no member should ever allow himself to be prevented from expressing frankly his views because it may offend a fellow member; and realizing this, no member should take offense at another member’s statements.”*⁷²

Another concern victims have is how they are to deal with individuals who repeatedly commit acts of disunity. An appropriate response for a victim is to take his concerns to the Local Spiritual Assembly. If he is uncertain whether or not to take a situation to the Spiritual Assembly, he may want to consult with an assistant to an Auxiliary Board member or the Board member himself. Repeated acts of disunity can be destructive enough to loving Bahá’í communities to warrant serious intervention by the institutions.

INFLUENCING WITH INTEGRITY

Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá have spoken of at least three acceptable means by which we may express ourselves in the consultative process: Eloquent speech, adducing proofs and conclusive arguments. Bahá’u’lláh tells us: *“...so much as capacity and capability allow, ye needs must deck the tree of being with fruits such as knowledge, wisdom, spiritual perception and **eloquent speech**.”*⁷³ Eloquent speech is moving, inspiring, influential and motivational. We recall that the Báb presents us with two guiding lights to assist us in our endeavor to express ourselves with integrity: *“The path to guidance is one of love and compassion, not of force and coercion.”*⁷⁴ On the one hand we can, and in fact are encouraged to, speak in ways that are uplifting, inspiring, moving and influential, whereas on the other hand we are cautioned not to be manipulative or abusive.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá instructs us that every member involved in consultation should *“expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion **and setteth forth his argument**.”*⁷⁵ Elsewhere He praises others who are *“adducing clear arguments and proofs,”*⁷⁶ indicating these are acceptable or even advisable methods of expressing ourselves as well.

From these guidelines it might be concluded that we are urged to speak with eloquence, set forth our arguments and adduce proofs relative to the issue at hand. These are the acceptable Bahá’í methods by which each and every member of a consultative group can express himself and set forth his perspective. But we are to take extreme care not to be coercive or forceful.

FACILITATING UNITY IN A DECISION-MAKING GROUP

Group unity during consultation is most commonly facilitated through the use of a Chairman. In the current Local Spiritual Assembly Guidelines for Alaska, the Chairman's functions related to unity include that the Chairman; "*Should see there is free and open discussion on any point and that it is kept to the point*", "*Should have decisions clearly stated so that they are understood by all*", and "*...is to keep discussion and business orderly.*" The Chairman is also to "*ensure...that all members are given the opportunity to contribute to the consultation.*"⁷⁷ But how do those present handle disunifying elements when they arise during Assembly meetings, Feasts, Conventions or any other community function? Or better yet, how do we prevent disunity in the first place? Is there some way to help guarantee a more consistent unity at these meetings, other than relying upon the maturity of each individual present? Would it be to our advantage to direct our Chairman to be more vigilant at arresting disunity at the first hint of its presence? Could we ask him to frequently call to our attention the value of avoiding control phrases and suggest we offer our opinions as 'Abdu'l-Bahá recommends? Could we request him to regularly remind us of the importance of keeping consultation dispassionate before it becomes passionate? Could we ask him to frequently review with us the disunifying effects of those red flags identified earlier? Our collective consultation on these matters will surely reveal effective methods that will contribute to our overall unity. It seems well worth the time and effort given the potential for such a noble outcome.

One important concern we don't want to overlook is the excess of power available to the Chairman of an Assembly, Convention, Feast or any consultative group. In a traditional setting the Chairman is given greater rights to make choices than any other member of the group. It is important to remember, however, that if anyone is given more "rights to choose" than someone else in the group, he is thereby given more power than the others, an inappropriate condition in Bahá'í consultation that leads to disunity. In the current - Local Spiritual Assembly Guidelines for Alaska we are reminded that the Chairman "*Has no special prerogative as Chairman, either within or without the meetings.*"⁷⁸ It is thus the job of the Chairman to see that "power" is evenly distributed among the members, which requires special vigilance over himself to insure he remains equal with everyone else and is careful not to assume an attitude of authority.

One skill that can help the Chairman remain in an equal position with others in the group is for him to make no decisions without approval or direction from the group. For example, in the traditional setting the Chairman might say, "We are going to deal with issue X tonight, but not issue Y." However, in Bahá'í consultation he has no authority to make this decision, nor to state it this way. Instead, to leave the decision and thus the power with the members, he might **bring up the issue in the form of a question**. This allows the group the decisive power, which is most desirable in Bahá'í consultation. For example, instead of making the above statement, he might say, "Does the group want to deal with both issues X and Y this evening?" You feel the difference? This is how the Chairman facilitates consultation in the group — by asking questions that lead the consultation in an orderly fashion without assuming the right to decide on his own. It's the group's decision, not an individual's. For a Chairman to apply this skill he simply makes all considered statements in the form of questions so the group can respond. This prevents

him from acquiring excessive power and tremendously equalizes a Chairman's position in the group.

Another example of how a Chairman might speak is: "We've been discussing this issue for a long time now. Do you want to continue?" instead of: "We've been discussing this issue for a long time now, let's move on." Or an individual might say: "I don't want to deal with that issue tonight." A traditional response from the Chairman may be: "It's on the agenda so we are going to." However, a more unifying response would be: "Mr. X doesn't want to deal with this issue tonight. How does the group want to proceed?" This is **facilitating** group consultation, not **controlling it**. For a Chairman to state his thoughts in the form of questions is a simple technique that saves him from acquiring excessive influence in the group. This also helps in the maturation of the institution, in that all the members become equally involved in everything the group does.

Another valuable method to enhance equal participation in consultation is through the use of a "talking stick." A stick, a stone, a feather or whatever the group agrees on can be used as an indicator for speaking on a given issue or subject. The item is passed, in a circle, from one member to another, each taking a turn to speak. No one is allowed to interrupt or speak out of turn. The item is passed all the way around the circle and if some want another chance to speak it is passed around again, allowing all a second chance. Never is it passed over someone or passed just to the one who gestures to speak. This method works very well for deepenings or various other kinds of study or investigations of truth, but can be cumbersome and time-consuming if rigidly used at Feasts, Assembly meetings or Conventions.

A "modified talking stick" is a valuable tool that works well to accommodate the incredible diversity and the wide range of differences that exist among people. It can assist in one of the goals of consultation — to allow equal involvement by both those who find it easy to talk and those who talk very little. It accommodates both those who are ready to speak as soon as an issue is proposed and those who require some time to think things over before they are ready to speak. It lends itself to the different ways men and women communicate. It also allows for equal involvement by people who need to talk to process their thoughts and those who require some silence to think. It incorporates both the talking stick format from the Native American culture and the open discussion format generally used by the Western culture, neither of which when used exclusively serves well to accommodate the principles of Bahá'í consultation.

To use this consultation tool, everyone involved in the experience is given a three-sided card with his name on it (actually, any object can be used to indicate that one wants to speak: a card, a stick, a rock, a ribbon or whatever a person can set in front of himself that will let the Chairman know he wants to speak). The Chairman simply reads the next item from the agenda or calls for the next issue for consultation. The facts are then presented by the Secretary or those who have pertinent facts to share. Then, if a member wishes to speak on the issue, he simply places his card out in front of himself, thus signaling to the Chairman that he wants to speak.

The Chairman's job is to note the order in which the cards are presented so people may be called upon accordingly. The Chairman waits until the speaker signals he is through before calling on the next person. When the consultation has stopped and there are no further cards presented, the Chairman may attempt to summarize the collective decision or the consensus of opinion or invite another member to do so.

During consultation on an issue no one is allowed to interrupt or speak out of turn except under two distinct conditions. When someone is talking and another is having a hard time understanding what is being said, he may raise his hand to ask a question. This is allowable for **clarification** purposes only! Then the person originally speaking continues until he is finished, without interruption. Another time one might consider interrupting by raising his hand is when he has facts pertinent to the discussion that would aid in another's understanding and **significantly** affect the current direction of the consultation. This must be carefully determined by anyone who wants to interrupt in that **facts only**, not opinions or anecdotes, are acceptable reasons for interrupting.

This method has another valuable characteristic. When someone is talking and you have a thought you would like to express, you can simply put your card out and jot down a simple reminder of your thought on a piece of paper so you won't forget it. You can then concentrate on listening carefully to the speaker. We all know how hard it is to remember what we want to say and to listen at the same time. This handy tool allows for people to respond to the speaker while at the same time to listen with care.

This method also allows all speakers the time to gather their thoughts before speaking. When they are called upon they have the floor until they signal they are finished. This truly accommodates the Bahá'í principle of **unfettered consultation**. It also allows for everyone to be involved.

THE ROLE OF THE INSTITUTIONS

Gaining a more profound understanding of unity, with a subsequently greater emphasis on its high priority, well deserves our collective attention. Enhancing our unity requires effort by all in their corresponding capacities. The institutions of the Cause, as well as individuals, have been given definite roles in carrying out this task: *“Authority and direction flow from the Assemblies, whereas the power to accomplish the tasks resides primarily in the entire body of the believers. It is the principal task of the Auxiliary Boards to assist in arousing and releasing this power.”*⁷⁹ Clearly, each of us has a role in contributing to our overall unity. The current requirement is to identify our individual role and to perform it.

Our role as individuals has been reviewed throughout this writing, both as to how we might deal with the disunifying behavior of others and how we can avoid such behavior ourselves. The institutions cannot lead the way by enforcing change upon the believers as is done in the old world order. They can, however, lead the way through exemplary conduct. This new cycle will also require individual initiative from a grassroots level, where every individual contributes to the task of creating a unified community.

The Guardian defined the role the Local Spiritual Assembly has in contributing to unity when he outlined its functions: *“They must endeavor to promote amity and concord amongst the friends, efface every lingering trace of distrust, coolness and estrangement from every heart, and secure in its stead an active and whole-hearted cooperation for the service of the Cause.”*⁸⁰ And again through his secretary: *“These bodies have the sacred obligation to help, advise, protect and guide the believers in every way within their power when appealed to — indeed they were established just for the purpose of keeping order and **unity** and obedience to the law of God amongst the believers.”*⁸¹

When outlining a National Spiritual Assembly’s responsibility for creating unity in the community, the Guardian explained: *“Its immediate purpose is to stimulate, **unify** and coordinate by frequent personal consultations, the manifold activities of the friends as well as the local Assemblies; and by keeping in close and constant touch with the Holy Land, initiate measures, and direct in general the affairs of the Cause in that country.”*⁸² The Universal House of Justice has emphasized the station of unity and reaffirmed the high priority this station holds for Bahá’í institutions when it wrote to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, stating: *“The guarantee of well-being and success in all your endeavors to serve the Cause of God can be stated in one word: unity. It is the alpha and omega of all Bahá’í objectives.”*⁸³ Frank and loving consultation among the members of these God-inspired institutions will surely result in effective ways and means for enhancing unity.

There are some specific ways institutions can and do contribute to unity. One is by enhancing the relationship that exists between institutions and the body of the believers. This relationship, as with all others, is highly dependent upon the way communication is carried out. Verbal communication by representatives of the institutions, phone conversations, written communication and even the newly created E-mails and faxes are all

examples of methods institutions use to communicate with the friends. An important component of communication is to assure the receiver perceives what the sender is attempting to communicate. If a local or national institution communicates in ways that appear insensitive to the receivers, it creates distance between itself and the body of the believers. Excessive use of the control phrases identified earlier, or any of the red flags of communication, can be harmful to the development of a close relationship between an institution and the individual believer. Written communications from our local and national institutions and their committees, officers and staff can be carefully reviewed before being sent out to assure sensitivity to these issues. Additionally, those who are chosen to communicate in person or by phone can be carefully selected and trained so as to improve this relationship. This issue deserves a high priority on everyone's agenda, given our goal to foster the proper functioning of local and national Bahá'í institutions.

Another way the elected institutions of the Cause can significantly contribute to unity is by managing their committees, offices and staffs in ways that are empowering and cooperative. The conventional way in Western culture is that a hierarchy of authority is created where those in the highest position instruct those under them, giving them little right to make any decisions in the matters they are charged to carry out. This is a type of "gofer management" where subordinates are told what to do and they just do it. The subordinates have little or no say in what or how things are done, and therefore have no feeling of ownership or belonging; they feel they are merely pawns in the organization. By its nature, this management style discourages initiative and new ideas from subordinate individuals and institutions. Those at the top of the hierarchy become increasingly frustrated at the lack of creativity and initiative, but perpetuate the situation by use of a controlling leadership style.

The Bahá'í system of management designed by the Guardian is quite different. In this Faith, the elected institutions do have the responsibility to manage the affairs of the Cause in their respective areas and the believers are obliged to obey. These institutions are charged to "*stimulate, unify and coordinate...the manifold activities of the friends;*" they are to "*direct the activities of the friends, guard vigilantly the Cause of God, and control and supervise the affairs of the Movement in general;*" their duties include "*the direction and management of all spiritual Bahá'í activities;*" it is their "*inescapable responsibility*" to "*guard the integrity, coordinate the activities and stimulate the life of the entire community*" and they "*are empowered to direct, unify, coordinate and stimulate the activities.*"⁸⁴ It is clear from this guidance that the elected institutions have a grave responsibility to manage the affairs of the Cause in their respective areas of jurisdiction.

One unique aspect of the Bahá'í system of management was explained by the Guardian. He made it clear in many of his letters that all decisions of primary importance belong to the elected institutions, whereas those of secondary importance can be delegated by these institutions to committees, offices and staff. These arms of the institution are then **empowered** by the institution they serve to make many of the decisions regarding the tasks assigned to them. Empowerment, then, is giving them **the right to decide** on those matters of secondary importance!

Some who serve on the elected institutions may feel they are unable to direct and manage the affairs of the Cause when they entrust to others many of the decisions affecting the work they are responsible for. But the Guardian initiated a wondrous component of Bahá'í administration when he insisted that reports and minutes be sent from those who are carrying out much of the work. These reports and minutes **keep the institutions fully informed** of what their committees, offices and staff are doing. If these arms of the institutions for some reason stray from fundamental Bahá'í principles in their work or are carrying out a task or directive in a way that is inconsistent with the wishes of the institutions, this can be discovered in the reports or minutes, and steps can be taken to adjust things accordingly. This relieves individuals serving on institutions of feeling they have to be in control by making all the decisions related to their work, an overwhelming burden to even attempt.

The Bahá'í system of management enables the believers to feel a greater sense of responsibility, a feeling of empowerment and a genuine sense of belonging — all so critical to our unity. Elected institutions who retain the responsibility to make all decisions of primary importance, who trust in their committees, offices and staff to make competent decisions on matters of secondary importance delegated to them; while those committees, offices and staff keep their respective institutions informed by reporting back through minutes or reports — constitutes an empowering decentralized system of management, unique in the world and truly divine in nature.

Individuals serving on the Institution of the Learned are charged with certain duties to contribute to the unity of the believers as well. Members of this institution include the Hands of the Cause of God, Counselor members of the International Teaching Centre, the Continental Boards of Counselors, the Auxiliary Boards and their assistants. The Guardian wrote through his Secretary: *“The members of the Boards in turn should encourage the friends — individuals and Assemblies alike — through correspondence and through visits, and impress upon them that the foundation of all of our activities is **unity**; they should encourage the friends to be unified under all circumstances, so that the work may go ahead with the confirmation of the Holy Spirit.”*⁸⁵ So how will they carry out this **encouragement**? Surely this institution will continue to develop those qualities that inspire the friends to conduct their lives in ways that exemplify the high priority of unity.

As in all relationships each partner has equal responsibilities in creating harmony. The role of the institutions as partners in relationship with the believers has been explored to some degree. The other partner, the individual believer in Bahá'u'lláh, has the responsibility to strive, as is best conveyed in a Bahá'í prayer, to *“be strong and fully prepared to render instant, exact and complete **obedience**”*⁸⁶ to the institutions of the Cause. Additionally, sincere respect, heartfelt love and an attitude of reverence towards the institutions are all fostered in the Writings and are necessary for the development of a truly united community.

The purpose of this essay has been to examine the concept of unity and to stimulate a more thorough investigation of its reality by the Bahá'í community. The issues herein have been raised to arouse awareness and inspire discussion and consultation on these matters,

thereby furthering our progress. Wouldn't it be meaningful to participate in deepenings, educational workshops and institutes which would investigate these concepts further, and then develop programs and training for the personal implementation of their reality? One method of assisting a community to gradually and systematically increase its level of unity is to establish continuing training classes for the believers, particularly for Spiritual Assembly members. Skills such as those suggested in the preceding pages can be learned through training. A collaborative process between the Institution of the Rulers and the Institution of the Learned can yield an ongoing program which will, over time, greatly elevate the consciousness and level of unity among the believers. Each individual Bahá'í and every institution might seriously consider how they will contribute to the unity of this very sacred Bahá'í community.

THE POWER AND MOTIVE TO CHANGE

For many of us the red flags of disunifying behavior are so ingrained that we find ourselves reacting to others in negative ways even before we know it. Our patterns of behavior have been reinforced for so many years that changing seems nearly impossible. Many of us have read multiple self-help books, attended personal development workshops and seminars, acquired private counselors, joined recovery groups, sought visions, changed our diets, and used various drugs, yet still find ourselves reacting to various situations in the same ways. Some of these secular approaches to behavioral change can provide self-awareness, may assist in understanding why we behave the way we do, and can train us to apply certain skills, but they do not and cannot provide either the motive or the power for lasting change. 'Abdu'l-Bahá reminds us of this: *"Therefore, the friends of God must adhere to the power which will create this love and unity in the hearts of the sons of men. Science cannot cure the illness of the body politic. Science cannot create amity and fellowship in human hearts... It must be accomplished solely through the divine bounties and spiritual bestowals which have descended from God in this day for that purpose. This is an exigency of the times, and the divine remedy has been provided. The spiritual teachings of the religion of God can alone create this love, unity and accord in human hearts."*⁸⁷

The great task of transforming disunity into unity and the **power** to accomplish it are further unveiled by Bahá'u'lláh: *"...the still greater task of converting satanic strength into heavenly power is one that We have been empowered to accomplish. The Force capable of such a transformation transcendeth the potency of the Elixir itself. **The Word of God, alone, can claim the distinction of being endowed with the capacity required for so great and far-reaching a change.**"*⁸⁸ We are reminded of this in the short daily obligatory prayer: *"I testify, at this moment, to **my powerlessness** and to **Thy might**, to my poverty and to Thy wealth."*⁸⁹

Bahá'u'lláh's proclamation that, *"The Word of God, alone, can claim the distinction of being endowed with the capacity required for so great and far-reaching a change,"* reinforces several Bahá'í disciplines. Reciting the verses of God each morning and evening, reciting the daily obligatory prayers, reading the Sacred Writings at the Nineteen Day Feasts, Holy Days

and other Bahá'í events, all expose us to, and immerse us in, the Word of God. And to what objective? That the satanic strength of our lower nature may be converted to heavenly power, our anger into acceptance, our conflict into agreement and our disunity into unity.

Any attempt to change is always preceded by a motive. Success at achieving our goals is significantly impeded when the driving force is an impure desire for self-gain. The motive for personal transformation is best achieved when it is neither for our own well-being, prosperity and happiness, nor out of the threat of punishment or the promise of reward in the next world, nor for personal glory. Bahá'u'lláh directs us to a pure motive — that we perform our acts of worship and service for the love of God, love of His Manifestation and love of the believers. This **pure motive** for attempting change is revealed in the following statement: “*Gird up the loins of your endeavor, O people of Bahá, that haply the tumult of religious dissension and strife that agitateth the peoples of the earth may be stilled, that every trace of it may be completely obliterated. For the love of God, and them that serve Him, arise to aid this most sublime and momentous Revelation.*”⁹⁰ Bahá'u'lláh reinforces this motive for change when He says: “*Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty.*”⁹¹ Will not our personal love for Bahá'u'lláh move us to obey His command and transform any disunifying behavior into actions which foster unity?

CONCLUSION

Again the question might be asked: So what is this unity that is the central theme of our religious faith? A summary remark might be that unity expresses itself among human beings as an eager desire to serve, play and live together; highly valuing our diversity of race, nationality, gender, age, education, social status, and clearly all other differences; with a collective conviction to avoid at all costs contention, conflict, discord, enmity and other divisive behavior that physically or emotionally hurts, abuses, damages or repulses another soul. This attention to how one's behavior affects his brothers and sisters, with greater concern for their well-being than one's own, is the realm of being to which Bahá'u'lláh is calling us — a realm of true unity.

As we rise to that level where love exists in its most mature form, where we see only the God-like image in each other, a greater unity thrives. As we curtail our tendencies to control one another, rebuke each other, manipulate others to believe as we do, coerce others to value the same activities, advise each other, criticize each other and express anger towards one another, then unity can flourish. And when unity exists, Bahá'ís want to be together, they want to attend deepenings, will participate more actively in community projects, will volunteer even more to serve on committees, will teach with greater enthusiasm, and will naturally “*Vie ye with each other in the service of God and of His Cause.*”⁹²

The emphasis on unity and the weightiness Bahá'u'lláh places on avoiding disunity was expressed by His seemingly peculiar two-year retirement into the mountains of Iráq, shortly after the martyrdom of the Báb. Why, at a time of such confusion and despair, did

He leave His family and that fragile community of believers in Baghdád to live a life of solitude in the wilderness? His own Words depict His motive for such a departure: *“The one object of Our retirement was to avoid becoming a subject of discord among the faithful, a source of disturbance unto Our companions, the means of injury to any soul, or the cause of sorrow to any heart. Beyond these, We cherished no other intention, and apart from them, We had no end in view.”*⁹³

We are again reminded of the overwhelming importance Bahá'u'lláh put on this issue of unity when we recall the words He chose to speak to the believers just prior to His ascension. One of the early believers shares the story:

“...Seven days before His ascension...in the afternoon...one of the servitors came down from upstairs in the Mansion, and announced: ‘The Blessed Beauty directs whoever is in the Mansion to come upstairs...

‘The Blessed Beauty lay in His bed. Two were seated one to either side of Him, and He leaned against them; they...were fanning Him. Then, He Himself began to speak; He addressed gracious and loving words to those about Him, spoke of His indisposition and recited some verses from the Book of Aqdas: ‘Be not dismayed, O peoples of the world, when the daystar of My beauty is set, and the heaven of My tabernacle is concealed from your eyes. Arise to further My Cause, and to exalt My Word amongst men.

*‘Since He recited these verses it became clear to us that He would ascend. Following these utterances He vehemently counselled us to abstain from dissension and strife. Although His blessed body was feeble He voiced this with great power, distinctly measuring out the words: ‘**Shun disharmony. Strive that no discord should arise among the friends. Let the friends avoid contention**’...And suddenly Jináb-i-‘Andalíb (the poet, whose name means the nightingale) could endure no more. He broke down and Bahá'u'lláh dismissed us saying, ‘Go, in God’s care.’ ‘Abdu'l-Bahá was present too; as I recall He was standing. He directed us to circumambulate the bed. Those of us in our group simply walked around Bahá'u'lláh’s bed and He said to us, ‘Go, in God’s care...’⁹⁴*

A befitting summary statement from our Exemplar, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá: *“The great and fundamental teachings of Bahá'u'lláh are the oneness of God and unity of mankind. This is the bond of union among Bahá'ís all over the world. They become united among themselves, then unite others. It is impossible to unite unless united. Christ said, ‘Ye are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has lost his savor, wherewith shall it be salted?’ This proves there were dissensions and lack of unity among His followers. Hence His admonition to unity of action.*

*“Now must we, likewise, bind ourselves together in the utmost unity, be kind and loving to each other, sacrificing all our possessions, our honor, yea, even our lives for each other. Then will it be proved that we have acted according to the teachings of God, that we have been real believers in the oneness of God and unity of mankind.”*⁹⁵

**EXTRACTS FROM THE BAHÁ'Í WRITINGS ON THE
SUBJECT OF UNITY**

From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

1. “After man’s recognition of God, and becoming steadfast in His Cause the station of affection, of harmony, of concord and of unity is superior to that of most other goodly deeds. This is what He Who is the Desire of the world hath testified at every morn and eve.”

(“Divorce”. A compilation of extracts from the Bahá’í Teachings discouraging divorce. Oakham, England: The Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1986, p. 5.)

2. “We ask God graciously to grant that all may evince such fairness of character, such goodliness of deed and kindness of word as will meet with His good pleasure. It hath been decreed that the citadels of men’s hearts should be subdued through the hosts of a noble character and praiseworthy deeds. Contention, discord, strife and sedition have all been forbidden in the Book of God.”

(“Trustworthiness”. A compilation of extracts from the Bahá’í Writings. London: The Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1987, p. 5.)

3. “Exalted, immensely exalted is He Who hath removed differences and established harmony. Glorified, infinitely glorified is He Who hath caused discord to cease, and decreed solidarity and unity. Praised be God, the Pen of the Most High hath lifted distinctions from between His servants and handmaidens, and, through His consummate favours and all-encompassing mercy, hath conferred upon all a station and rank of the same plane. He hath broken the back of vain imaginings with the sword of utterance and hath obliterated the perils of idle fancies through the pervasive power of His might.”

(“Women”. A compilation of extracts from the Bahá’í Writings. rev. ed. London: The Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1990, p. 1.)

4. “O ye that dwell on earth! The distinguishing feature that marketh the preeminent character of this Supreme Revelation consisteth in that We have, on the one hand, blotted out from the pages of God’s holy Book whatsoever hath been the cause of strife, of malice and mischief amongst the children of men, and have, on the other, laid down the essential prerequisites of concord, of understanding, of complete and enduring unity. Well is it with them that keep My statutes.”

(“Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh”. rev. ed. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1952, p. 97.)

5. “With the utmost unity, and in a spirit of perfect fellowship, exert yourselves, that ye may be enabled to achieve that which beseemeth this Day of God. Verily I say, strife and dissension, and whatsoever the mind of man abhorreth are entirely unworthy of his station.”

(“Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh”, p. 196.)

6. “My object is none other than the betterment of the world and the tranquillity of its peoples. The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established. This unity can never be achieved so long as the counsels which the Pen of the Most High hath revealed are suffered to pass unheeded.”

(“Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh”, p. 286.)

7. “It is Our wish and desire that every one of you may become a source of all goodness unto men, and an example of uprightness to mankind. Beware lest ye prefer yourselves above your neighbors. Fix your gaze upon Him Who is the Temple of God amongst men. He, in truth, hath offered up His life as a ransom for the redemption of the world. He, verily, is the All-Bountiful, the Gracious, the Most High. If any differences arise amongst you, behold Me standing before your face, and overlook the faults of one another for My name’s sake and as a token of your love for My manifest and resplendent Cause. We love to see you at all times consorting in amity and concord within the paradise of My good-pleasure, and to inhale from your acts the fragrance of friendliness and unity, of loving-kindness and fellowship. Thus counselleth you the All-Knowing, the Faithful. We shall always be with you; if We inhale the perfume of your fellowship, Our heart will assuredly rejoice, for naught else can satisfy Us. To this beareth witness every man of true understanding.”

(“Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh”, pp. 315-316.)

8. “The Divine Messengers have been sent down, and their Books were revealed, for the purpose of promoting the knowledge of God, and of furthering unity and fellowship amongst men.”

(“Epistle to the Son of the Wolf”. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1971, p. 12.)

9. “Revile ye not one another. We, verily, have come to unite and weld together all that dwell on earth. Unto this beareth witness what the ocean of Mine utterance hath revealed amongst men, and yet most of the people have gone astray. If anyone revile you, or trouble touch you, in the path of God, be patient, and put your trust in Him Who heareth, Who seeth. He, in truth, witnesseth, and perceiveth, and doeth what He pleaseth, through the power of His sovereignty. He, verily, is the Lord of strength, and of might. In the Book of God, the Mighty, the Great, ye have been forbidden to engage in contention and conflict. Lay fast hold on whatever will profit you, and profit the peoples of the world.”

(“Epistle to the Son of the Wolf”, p. 24.)

10. “It is binding and incumbent upon the peoples of the world, one and all, to extend aid unto this momentous Cause which is come from the heaven of the Will of the ever-abiding God, that perchance the fire of animosity which blazeth in the hearts of some of the peoples of the earth may, through the living waters of divine wisdom and by virtue of heavenly counsels and exhortations, be quenched, and the light of unity and concord may shine forth and shed its radiance upon the world.”

(“Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas”. Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1978, p. 23.)

11. "In these days it is incumbent upon everyone to adhere tenaciously unto unity and concord and to labour diligently in promoting the Cause of God, that perchance the wayward souls may attain that which will lead unto abiding prosperity."

("Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas", p. 60.)

12. "The light of men is justice. Quench it not with the contrary winds of oppression and tyranny. The purpose of justice is the appearance of unity among men. The ocean of divine wisdom surgeth within this exalted word, while the books of the world cannot contain its inner significance."

("Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas", pp. 66-67.)

13. "Through each and every one of the verses which the Pen of the Most High hath revealed, the doors of love and unity have been unlocked and flung open to the face of men. We have erewhile declared – and Our Word is the truth –: 'Consort with the followers of all religions in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship.' Whatsoever hath led the children of men to shun one another, and hath caused dissensions and divisions amongst them, hath, through the revelation of these words, been nullified and abolished."

("Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas", p. 87.)

14. "This is the day when the gems of constancy that lie hid in the mine of men's inner selves should be made manifest. O people of Justice! Be as brilliant as the light and as splendid as the fire that blazed in the Burning Bush. The brightness of the fire of your love will no doubt fuse and unify the contending peoples and kindreds of the earth, whilst the fierceness of the flame of enmity and hatred cannot but result in strife and ruin. We beseech God that He may shield His creatures from the evil designs of His enemies. He verily hath power over all things."

("Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas", p. 88.)

15. "Say: O people of God! Adorn your temples with the adornment of trustworthiness and piety. Help, then, your Lord with the hosts of goodly deeds and a praiseworthy character. We have forbidden you dissension and conflict in My Books, and My Scriptures, and My Scrolls, and My Tablets, and have wished thereby naught else save your exaltation and advancement."

("Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas", p. 120.)

16. "The purpose of religion as revealed from the heaven of God's holy Will is to establish unity and concord amongst the peoples of the world; make it not the cause of dissension and strife. The religion of God and His divine law are the most potent instruments and the surest of all means for the dawning of the light of unity amongst men."

("Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas", p. 129.)

17. "Behold the disturbances which, for many a long year, have afflicted the earth, and the perturbation that hath seized its peoples. It hath either been ravaged by war, or tormented by sudden and unforeseen calamities. Though the world is encompassed with misery and distress, yet no man hath paused to reflect what the cause or source of that may be. Whenever the True Counsellor uttered a word in admonishment, lo, they all denounced

Him as a mover of mischief and rejected His claim. How bewildering, how confusing is such behavior! No two men can be found who may be said to be outwardly and inwardly united. The evidences of discord and malice are apparent everywhere, though all were made for harmony and union. The Great Being saith: O well-beloved ones! The tabernacle of unity hath been raised; regard ye not one another as strangers. Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch.”

(“Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas”, pp. 163-164.)

18. “Such exhortations to union and concord as are inscribed in the Books of the Prophets by the Pen of the Most High bear reference unto specific matters; not a union that would lead to disunity or a concord which would create discord. This is the station where measures are set unto everything, a station where every deserving soul shall be given his due. Well is it with them that appreciate the meaning and grasp the intent of these words, and woe betide the heedless. Unto this all the evidences of nature, in their very essences, bear ample testimony. Every discerning man of wisdom is well acquainted with that which We have mentioned, but not those who have strayed far from the living fountain of fairmindedness and are roving distraught in the wilderness of ignorance and blind fanaticism.

“The Great Being saith: O ye children of men! The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race, and to foster the spirit of love and fellowship amongst men. Suffer it not be become a source of dissension and discord, of hate and enmity. This is the straight Path, the fixed and immovable foundation. Whatsoever is raised on this foundation, the changes and chances of the world can never impair its strength, nor will the revolution of countless centuries undermine its structure.”

(“Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas”, pp. 167-168.)

19. “For were men to abide by and observe the divine teachings, every trace of evil would be banished from the face of the earth. However, the widespread differences that exist among mankind and the prevalence of sedition, contention, conflict and the like are the primary factors which provoke the appearance of the satanic spirit. Yet the Holy Spirit hath ever shunned such matters. A world in which naught can be perceived save strife, quarrels and corruption is bound to become the seat of the throne, the very metropolis, of Satan.”

(“Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas”, pp. 176-177.)

20. “Indeed thou didst grasp the significance of rendering assistance unto God and didst arise to achieve this through the power of wisdom and utterance. Say: To assist Me is to teach My Cause. This is a theme with which whole Tablets are laden. This is the changeless commandment of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future. Comprehend this, O ye men of insight. They that have passed beyond the bounds of wisdom fail to understand the meaning of assisting God as set forth in the Book. Say: Fear ye God and sow not the seeds of dissension amongst men.”

(“Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas”, p. 196.)

21. "O ye that dwell on earth! The religion of God is for love and unity; make it not the cause of enmity or dissension."

(*"Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas"*, p. 220.)

22. "Conflict and contention are categorically forbidden in His Book. This is a decree of God in this Most Great Revelation. It is divinely preserved from annulment and is invested by Him with the splendour of His confirmation. Verily He is the All-Knowing, the All-Wise."

(*"Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed after the Kitáb-i-Aqdas"*, p. 221.)

23. "Ye have been forbidden in the Book of God to engage in contention and conflict, to strike another, or to commit similar acts whereby hearts and souls may be saddened."

(*"The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book"*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992, verse 148, pp. 72-73.)

24. "O people of Bahá! Ye are the dawning-places of the love of God and the daysprings of His loving-kindness. Defile not your tongues with the cursing and reviling of any soul, and guard your eyes against that which is not seemly. Set forth that which ye possess. If it be favourably received, your end is attained; if not, to protest is vain. Leave that soul to himself and turn unto the Lord, the Protector, the Self-Subsisting. Be not the cause of grief, much less of discord and strife. The hope is cherished that ye may obtain true education in the shelter of the tree of His tender mercies and act in accordance with that which God desireth. Ye are all the leaves of one tree and the drops of one ocean."

(*"The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book"*, pp. 91-92.)

25. "Should anyone wax angry with you, respond to him with gentleness; and should anyone upbraid you, forbear to upbraid him in return, but leave him to himself and put your trust in God, the omnipotent Avenger, the Lord of might and justice."

(*"The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book"*, verse 153, p. 75.)

26. "O MY FRIENDS! Walk ye in the ways of the good pleasure of the Friend, and know that His pleasure is in the pleasure of His creatures. That is: no man should enter the house of his friend save at his friend's pleasure, nor lay hands upon his treasures nor prefer his own will to his friend's, and in no wise seek an advantage over him. Ponder this, ye that have insight!"

(*"The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh"*. Wilmette, Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1939, #43 from the Persian, p. 37.)

From the Writings and Utterances of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

1. “Another unity is the spiritual unity which emanates from the breaths of the Holy Spirit. This is greater than the unity of mankind. Human unity or solidarity may be likened to the body whereas unity from the breaths of the Holy Spirit is the spirit animating the body. This is a perfect unity. It creates such a condition in mankind that each one will make sacrifices for the other and the utmost desire will be to forfeit life and all that pertains to it in behalf of another’s good. This is the unity which existed among the disciples of His Holiness Jesus Christ and bound together the prophets and holy souls of the past. It is the unity which through the influence of the divine spirit is permeating the Bahá’ís so that each offers his life for the other and strives with all sincerity to attain his good-pleasure. This is the unity which caused twenty thousand people in Írán to give their lives in love and devotion to it. It made the Báb the target of a thousand arrows and caused Bahá’u’lláh to suffer exile and imprisonment forty years. This unity is the very spirit of the body of the world. It is impossible for the body of the world to become quickened with life without its vivification.”

(“Bahá’í World Faith: Selected Writings of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’”. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1956, p. 258.)

2. “The aim of the appearance of the Blessed Perfection – may my life be a sacrifice for His beloved ones! – was the unity and agreement of all the people of the world. Therefore, my utmost desire, firstly, is the accord and union and love of the believers and after that of all the people of the world. Now, if unity and agreement is not established among the believers, I will become heartbroken and the afflictions will leave a greater imprint upon me. But if the fragrance of love and unity among the believers is wafted to my nostrils, every trial will become a mercy, every unhappiness a joy, every difficulty an expansion, every misery a treasure and every hardship a felicity.”

(Bahá’í World Faith: Selected Writings of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’”, pp. 402-403.)

3. “The most great work to accomplish is this: — that ye must strive so that the believers of God in America may arise to union and concord. The most important feat in this day is harmony and agreement. No soul must interfere with another and no one must find fault with the rest.”

(“Bahá’í World Faith: Selected Writings of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’”, p. 408.)

4. “Wherefore, O my loving friends! Consort with all the peoples, kindreds and religions of the world with the utmost truthfulness, uprightness, faithfulness, kindness, good-will and friendliness; that all the world of being may be filled with the holy ecstasy of the grace of Bahá, that ignorance, enmity, hate and rancor may vanish from the world and the darkness of estrangement amidst the peoples and kindreds of the world may give way to the Light of Unity.”

(“Bahá’í World Faith: Selected Writings of Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’”, p. 445.)

5. “It is certain that the greatest of instrumentalities for achieving the advancement and the glory of man, the supreme agency for the enlightenment and the redemption of the world, is love and fellowship and unity among all the members of the human race. Nothing can be effected in the world, not even conceivably, without unity and agreement, and the perfect means for engendering fellowship and union is true religion.”

(“The Secret of Divine Civilization”. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1957, p. 73.)

6. “Wherefore must the loved ones of God associate in affectionate fellowship with stranger and friend alike, showing forth to all the utmost loving-kindness, disregarding the degree of their capacity, never asking whether they deserve to be loved. In every instance let the friends be considerate and infinitely kind. Let them never be defeated by the malice of the people, by their aggression and their hate, no matter how intense. If others hurl their darts against you, offer them milk and honey in return; if they poison your lives, sweeten their souls; if they injure you, teach them how to be comforted; if they inflict a wound upon you, be a balm to their sores; if they sting you, hold to their lips a refreshing cup.”

(“Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”. Haifa: Bahá’í World Centre, 1978, p. 24.)

7. “O honoured lady! Look about thee at the world: here unity, mutual attraction, gathering together, engender life, but disunity and inharmony spell death. When thou dost consider all phenomena, thou wilt see that every created thing hath come into being through the mingling of many elements, and once this collectivity of elements is dissolved, and this harmony of components is dissevered, the life form is wiped out.”

(“Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”, p. 31.)

8. “So far as ye are able, ignite a candle of love in every meeting, and with tenderness rejoice and cheer ye every heart. Care for the stranger as for one of your own; show to alien souls the same loving kindness ye bestow upon your faithful friends. Should any come to blows with you, seek to be friends with him; should any stab you to the heart, be ye a healing salve unto his sores; should any taunt and mock at you, meet him with love. Should any heap his blame upon you, praise ye him; should he offer you a deadly poison, give him the choicest honey in exchange; and should he threaten your life, grant him a remedy that will heal him evermore. Should he be pain itself, be ye his medicine; should he be thorns, be ye his roses and sweet herbs. Perchance such ways and words from you will make this darksome world turn bright at last; will make this dusty earth turn heavenly, this devilish prison place become a royal palace of the Lord – so that war and strife will pass and be no more, and love and trust will pitch their tents on the summits of the world. Such is the essence of God’s admonitions; such in sum are the teachings for the Dispensation of Bahá.”

(“Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”, p. 34.)

9. “O army of God! Beware lest ye harm any soul, or make any heart to sorrow; lest ye wound any man with you 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.”

(“Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”, p. 73.)

10. “The Spiritual Assemblies are collectively the most effective of all instruments for establishing unity and harmony. This matter is of the utmost importance; this is the magnet that draweth down the confirmations of God. If once the beauty of the unity of the friends – this Divine Beloved – bedecked in the adornments of the Abhá Kingdom, it is certain that within a very short time those countries will become the Paradise of the All-Glorious, and that out of the west the splendours of unity will cast their bright rays over all the earth.”

(“Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”, pp. 83-84.)

11. “Strive with heart and soul in order to bring about union and harmony among the white and the black and prove thereby the unity of the Bahá’í world wherein distinction of colour findeth no place, but where hearts only are considered. Praise be to God, the hearts of the friends are united and linked together, whether they be from the east or the west, from north or from south, whether they be German, French, Japanese, American, and whether they pertain to the white, the black, the red, the yellow or the brown race. Variations of colour, of land and of race are of no importance in the Bahá’í Faith; on the contrary, Bahá’í unity overcometh them all and doth away with all these fancies and imaginations.”

(“Selections from the Writing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”, pp. 112-113.)

12. “From separation doth every kind of hurt and harm proceed, but the union of created things doth ever yield most laudable results. From the pairing of even the smallest particles in the world of being are the grace and bounty of God made manifest; and the higher the degree, the more momentous is the union.... And above all other unions is that between human beings, especially when it cometh to pass in the love of God. Thus is the primal oneness made to appear; thus is laid the foundation of love in the spirit.”

(“Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”, p. 119.)

13. “One must see in every human being only that which is worthy of praise. When this is done, one can be a friend to the whole human race. If, however, we look at people from the standpoint of their faults, then being a friend to them is a formidable task.”

(“Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”, p. 169.)

14. “Now some of the mischief-makers, with many stratagems, are seeking leadership, and in order to reach this position they instill doubts among the friends that they may cause differences, and that these differences may result in their drawing a party to themselves. But the friends of God must be awake and must know that the scattering of these doubts hath as its motive personal desires and the achievement of leadership.

“Do not disrupt Bahá’í unity, and know that this unity cannot be maintained save through faith in the Covenant of God.”

(“Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”, pp. 214-215.)

15. "...O ye Bahá'ís, strive ye with all your might to create, through the power of the Word of God, genuine love, spiritual communion and durable bonds among individuals. This is your task."

("Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá", p. 246.)

16. "Remember how Adam and the others once dwelt together in Eden. No sooner, however, did a quarrel break out between Adam and Satan than they were, one and all, banished from the Garden, and this was meant as a warning to the human race, a means of telling humankind that dissension — even with the Devil — is the way to bitter loss. This is why, in our illumined age, God teacheth that conflicts and disputes are not allowable, not even with Satan himself."

("Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá", p. 275.)

17. "Today the one overriding need is unity and harmony among the beloved of the Lord, for they should have among them but one heart and soul and should, so far as in them lieth, unitedly withstand the hostility of all the peoples of the world; they must bring to an end the benighted prejudices of all nations and religions and must make known to every member of the human race that all are the leaves of one branch, the fruits of one bough.

"Until such time, however, as the friends establish perfect unity among themselves, how can they summon others to harmony and peace?"

("Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá", p. 277.)

18. "Similarly, consider how the cause of the welfare, happiness, joy and comfort of humankind are amity and union, whereas dissension and discord are most conducive to hardship, humiliation, agitation and failure."

("Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá", p. 287.)

19. "Consequently, that which is conducive to association and attraction and unity among the sons of men is the means of the life of the world of humanity, and whatever causeth division, repulsion and remoteness leadeth to the death of humankind."

("Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá", p. 290.)

20. "A critic may object, saying that peoples, races, tribes and communities of the world are of different and varied customs, habits, tastes, character, inclinations and ideas, that opinions and thoughts are contrary to one another, and how, therefore, is it possible for real unity to be revealed and perfect accord among human souls to exist?

"In answer we say that differences are of two kinds. One is the cause of annihilation and is like the antipathy existing among warring nations and conflicting tribes who seek each other's destruction, uprooting one another's families, depriving one another of rest and comfort and unleashing carnage. The other kind which is a token of diversity is the essence of perfection and the cause of the appearance of the bestowals of the Most Glorious Lord.

"...Thus when that unifying force, the penetrating influence of the Word of God, taketh effect, the difference of customs, manners, habits, ideas, opinions and dispositions embelisheth the world of humanity. This diversity, this difference is like the naturally created dissimilarity and variety of the limbs and organs of the human body, for each one contributeth to the beauty, efficiency and perfection of the whole. When these different

limbs and organs come under the influence of man's sovereign soul, and the soul's power pervadeth the limbs and members, veins and arteries of the body, then difference reinforceth harmony, diversity strengtheneth love, and multiplicity is the greatest factor for coordination."

("Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá", pp. 290-291.)

21. "I charge you all that each one of you concentrate all the thoughts of your heart on love and unity. When a thought of war comes, oppose it by a stronger thought of peace. A thought of hatred must be destroyed by a more powerful thought of love. Thoughts of war bring destruction to all harmony, well-being, restfulness and content.

"Thoughts of love are constructive of brotherhood, peace, friendship and happiness....

"If you desire with all your heart, friendship with every race on earth, your thought, spiritual and positive, will spread; it will become the desire of others, growing stronger and stronger, until it reaches the minds of all men."

("Paris Talks: Addresses Given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911-1912". New Delhi: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971, pp. 29-30.)

22. "Likewise, when you meet those whose opinions differ from your own, do not turn away your face from them. All are seeking truth, and there are many roads leading thereto. Truth has many aspects, but it remains always and forever one.

"Do not allow difference of opinion, or diversity of thought to separate you from your fellow-men, or to be the cause of dispute, hatred and strife in your hearts.

"Rather, search diligently for the truth and make all men your friends.

"Every edifice is made of many different stones, yet each depends on the other to such an extent that if one were displaced the whole building would suffer; if one is faulty the structure is imperfect.

"Bahá'u'lláh has drawn the circle of unity, He has made a design for the uniting of all the peoples, and for the gathering of them all under the shelter of the tent of universal unity. This is the work of the Divine Bounty, and we must all strive with heart and soul until we have the reality of unity in our midst, and as we work, so will strength be given unto us. Leave all thought of self, and strive only to be obedient and submissive to the Will of God. In this way only shall we become citizens of the Kingdom of God, and attain unto life everlasting."

("Paris Talks: Addresses Given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911-1912", pp. 53-54.)

23. "So it is with the great body of humanity. The wonderful Law of Attraction, Harmony and Unity, holds together this marvelous Creation.

"As with the whole, so with the parts; whether a flower or a human body, when the attracting principle is withdrawn from it, the flower or the man dies. It is therefore clear that attraction, harmony, unity and Love, are the cause of life, whereas repulsion, discord, hatred and separation bring death.

"We have seen that whatever brings division into the world of existence causes death. Likewise in the world of the spirit does the same law operate.

"Therefore should every servant of the One God be obedient to the law of love, avoiding all hatred, discord and strife."

("Paris Talks: Addresses Given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911-1912", pp. 139-140.)

24. “The love which exists between the hearts of believers is prompted by the ideal of the unity of spirits. This love is attained through the knowledge of God, so that men see the Divine Love reflected in the heart. Each sees in the other the Beauty of God reflected in the soul, and finding this point of similarity, they are attracted to one another in love. This love will make all men the waves of one sea, this love will make them all the stars of one heaven and the fruits of one tree. This love will bring the realization of true accord, the foundation of real unity.”

(“*Paris Talks: Addresses Given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Paris in 1911-1912*”, pp. 180-181.)

25. “Strive to attain a station of absolute love one toward another. By the absence of love, enmity increases. By the exercise of love, love strengthens and enmities dwindle away.”

(“*Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá During His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*”. 2nd ed. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1982, p. 9.)

26. “When you assemble, you must reflect the lights of the heavenly Kingdom. Let your hearts be as mirrors in which the radiance of the Sun of Reality is visible. Each bosom must be a telegraph station--one terminus of the wire attached to the soul, the other fixed in the Supreme Concourse — so that inspiration may descend from the Kingdom of Abhá and questions of reality be discussed. Then opinions will coincide with truth; day by day there will be progression, and the meetings will become more radiant and spiritual. This attainment is conditioned upon unity and agreement. The more perfect the love and agreement, the more the divine confirmations and assistance of the Blessed Perfection will descend. May this prove to be a divine meeting, and may boundless bestowals come down upon you. Strive with all your hearts and with the very power of life that unity and love may continually increase. In discussions look toward the reality without being self-opinionated. Let no one assert and insist upon his own mere opinion; nay, rather, let each investigate reality with the greatest love and fellowship. Consult upon every matter, and when one presents the point of view of reality itself, that shall be acceptable to all. Then will spiritual unity increase among you, individual illumination will be greater, happiness will be more abundant, and you will draw nearer and nearer to the Kingdom of God.”

(“*Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá During His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*”, p. 183.)

27. “Whatsoever is conducive to unity is merciful and from the divine bounty itself. Every universal affair is divine. Everything which conduces to separation and estrangement is satanic because it emanates from the purposes of self. Consider how clearly it is shown in creation that the cause of existence is unity and cohesion and the cause of nonexistence is separation and dissension. By a divine power of creation the elements assemble together in affinity, and the result is a composite being. Certain of these elements have united, and man has come into existence. Certain other combinations produce plants and animals. Therefore, this affinity of the inanimate elements is the cause of life and being. Through their commingling, therefore, human affinity, love and fellowship are made possible. If the elements were not assembled together in affinity to produce the body of man, the higher intelligent forces could not be manifest in the body. But when these elements separate,

when their affinity and cohesion are overcome, death and dissolution of the body they have built inevitably follow. Therefore, affinity and unity among even these material elements mean life in the body of man, and their discord and disagreement mean death. Throughout all creation, in all the kingdoms, this law is written: that love and affinity are the cause of life, and discord and separation are the cause of death.”

(“Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá During His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912”, p. 207.)

28. “Consider the harmful effect of discord and dissension in a family; then reflect upon the favors and blessings which descend upon that family when unity exists among its various members. What incalculable benefits and blessings would descend upon the great human family if unity and brotherhood were established! In this century when the beneficent results of unity and the ill effects of discord are so clearly apparent, the means for the attainment and accomplishment of human fellowship have appeared in the world. Bahá’u’lláh has proclaimed and provided the way by which hostility and dissension may be removed from the human world. He has left no ground or possibility for strife and disagreement.”

(“Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá During His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912”, p. 230.)

29. “When the light of Bahá’u’lláh dawned from the East, He proclaimed the promise of the oneness of humanity. He addressed all mankind, saying, ‘Ye are all the fruits of one tree. There are not two trees: one a tree of divine mercy, the other the tree of Satan.’ Again He said, ‘Ye are all the fruits of one tree, the leaves of one branch.’ This was His announcement; this was His promise of the oneness of the world of humanity. Anathema and execration were utterly abrogated. He said, ‘It is not becoming in man to curse another; it is not befitting that man should attribute darkness to another; it is not meet that one human being should consider another human being as bad; nay, rather, all mankind are the servant of one God; God is the Father of all; there is not a single exception to that law. There are no people of Satan; all belong to the Merciful. There is no darkness; all is light. All are the servants of God, and man must love humanity from his heart. He must, verily, behold humanity as submerged in the divine mercy.’

“Bahá’u’lláh has made no exception to this rule. He said that among mankind there may be those who are ignorant; they must be trained. Some are sick; they must be treated. Some are immature; they must be helped to attain maturity. In other respects humanity is submerged in the ocean of divine mercy. God is the Father of all. He educates, provides for and loves all; for they are His servants and His creation. Surely the Creator loves His creatures. It would be impossible to find an artist who does not love his own production. Have you ever seen a man who did not love his own actions? Even though they be bad actions, he loves them. How ignorant, therefore, the thought that God, Who created man, educated and nurtured him, surrounded him with all blessings, made the sun and all phenomenal existence for his benefit, bestowed upon him tenderness and kindness and then did not love him. This is palpable ignorance, for no matter to what religion a man belongs, even though he be an atheist or materialist, nevertheless, God nurtures him, bestows His kindness and sheds upon him His light. How then can we believe God is wrathful and unloving? How can we even imagine this, when as a matter of fact we are

witnesses of the tenderness and mercy of God upon every hand? All about us we behold manifestations of the love of God. If, therefore, God be loving, what should we do? We have nothing else to do but to emulate Him. Just as God loves all and is kind to all, so must we really love and be kind to everybody. We must consider none bad, none worthy of detestation, no one as an enemy. We must love all; nay, we must consider everyone as related to us, for all are the servants of one God. All are under the instructions of one Educator. We must strive day and night that love and amity may increase, that this bond of unity may be strengthened, that joy and happiness may more and more prevail, that in unity and solidarity all mankind may gather beneath the shadow of God, that people may turn to God for their sustenance, finding in Him the life that is everlasting. Thus may they be confirmed in the Kingdom of God and live forever through His grace and bounty.

“Bahá’u’lláh has clearly said in His Tablets that if you have an enemy, consider him not as an enemy. Do not simply be long-suffering; nay, rather, love him. Your treatment of him should be that which is becoming to lovers. Do not even say that he is your enemy. Do not see any enemies. Though he be your murderer, see no enemy. Look upon him with the eye of friendship. Be mindful that you do not consider him as an enemy and simply tolerate him, for that is but stratagem and hypocrisy. To consider a man your enemy and love him is hypocrisy. This is not becoming of any soul. You must behold him as a friend. You must treat him well. This is right.”

(“Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá During His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912”, pp. 266-267.)

30. “You must manifest complete love and affection toward all mankind. Do not exalt yourselves above others, but consider all as your equals, recognizing them as the servants of one God. Know that God is compassionate toward all; therefore, love all from the depths of your hearts, prefer all religionists before yourselves, be filled with love for every race, and be kind toward the people of all nationalities. Never speak disparagingly of others, but praise without distinction. Pollute not your tongues by speaking evil of another. Recognize your enemies as friends, and consider those who wish you evil as the wishers of good. You must not see evil as evil and then compromise with your opinion, for to treat in a smooth, kindly way one whom you consider evil or an enemy is hypocrisy, and this is not worthy or allowable. You must consider your enemies as your friends, look upon your evil-wishers as your well-wishers and treat them accordingly. Act in such a way that your heart may be free from hatred. Let not your heart be offended with anyone. If some one commits an error and wrong toward you, you must instantly forgive him. Do not complain of others. Refrain from reprimanding them, and if you wish to give admonition or advice, let it be offered in such a way that it will not burden the bearer. Turn all your thoughts toward bringing joy to hearts. Beware! Beware! lest ye offend any heart. Assist the world of humanity as much as possible. Be the source of consolation to every sad one, assist every weak one, be helpful to every indigent one, care for every sick one, be the cause of glorification to every lowly one, and shelter those who are overshadowed by fear.

“In brief, let each one of you be as a lamp shining forth with the light of the virtues of the world of humanity. Be trustworthy, sincere, affectionate and replete with chastity. Be illumined, be spiritual, be divine, be glorious, be quickened of God, be a Bahá’í.”

(“Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá During His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912”, p. 453.)

31. “Another commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another even as I love you. Great mercy and blessings are promised to the people of your land, but on one condition; that their hearts be filled with the fire of love, that they live in perfect kindness and harmony like one soul in different bodies. *Like one soul in different bodies*. If they fail in this condition the great blessings will be deferred. Never forget this; look at one another with the eye of perfection; look at me, follow me, be as I am...”

(“*An Early Pilgrimage, Star of the West, XII*”, pp. 251 & 254.)

32. “It is clear that the reality of mankind is diverse, that opinions are various and sentiments different; and this difference of opinions, of thoughts, of intelligence, of sentiments among the human species, arises from essential necessity; for the differences in the degrees of existence of creatures is one of the necessities of existence, which unfolds itself in infinite forms. Therefore we have need of a general power which may dominate the sentiments, the opinions, and the thoughts of all, thanks to which these divisions may no longer have effect, and all individuals may be brought under the influence of the unity of the world of humanity. It is clear and evident that this greatest power in the human world is the love of God. It brings the different peoples under the shadow of the tent of affection; it gives to the antagonistic and hostile nations and families the greatest love and union.”

(“*Some Answered Questions*”. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1930, pp. 345-346.)

33. “In brief, O ye believers of God! The text of the Divine Book is this: If two souls quarrel and contend about a question of the Divine questions, differing and disputing, *both are wrong*. The wisdom of this incontrovertible law of God is this: That between two souls from amongst the believers of God, no contention and dispute may arise; that they may speak with each other with infinite amity and love. Should there appear the least trace of controversy, they must remain silent, and both parties must continue their discussions no longer, but ask the reality of the question from the Interpreter. This is the irrefutable command!”

(“*Tablets of the Divine Plan*”. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1959, pp. 21-22.)

From the Writings of Shoghi Effendi

1. “No force is as important in spreading the Faith and carrying forward the teaching work as unity amongst the friends. When they cooperate with each other to achieve their objectives, they receive divine inspiration and assistance, which otherwise would be denied them. Unity is like a mirror, which attracts the rays of the sun of God’s bounty.”

(“Lights of Guidance: A Bahá’í Reference File”. New Delhi: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1983, p. 303.)

2. “According to the direct and sacred command of God we are forbidden to utter slander, are commanded to show forth peace and amity, are exhorted to rectitude of conduct, straight forwardness and harmony with all the kindreds and peoples of the world.”

(“Bahá’í Administration”. Wilmette: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1968 p. 4.)

3. “Ours is the duty to strive by day and night to fulfill our own obligations and then trust in His (‘Abdu’l-Bahá) Guidance and never failing Grace. Unity amongst the friends, selflessness in our labors in His Path, detachment from all worldly things, the greatest prudence and caution in every step we take, earnest endeavor to carry out only what is His Holy Will and Pleasure, the constant awareness of His Presence and of the example of His Life, the absolute shunning of whomsoever we feel to be an enemy of the Cause...these, and foremost among them is the need for unity, appear to me as our most vital duties, should we dedicate our lives for His service.”

(“Bahá’í Administration”, p. 16.)

From Letters Written on Behalf of Shoghi Effendi

1. “...Vicious criticism is indeed a calamity. But its root is lack of faith in the system of Bahá’u’lláh, i.e., the Administrative Order — and lack of obedience to Him — for He has forbidden it! If the Bahá’ís would follow the Bahá’í laws in voting, in electing, in serving and in abiding by Assembly decisions, all this waste of strength through criticizing others could be diverted into cooperation and achieving the Plan...”

(“Directives from the Guardian”. New Delhi: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1973, p. 18. Cited from “U.S. Bahá’í News”. July, 1950, p. 2.)

2. “Regarding your question about the need for greater unity among the friends, there is no doubt that this is so, and the Guardian feels that one of the chief instruments for promoting it is to teach the Bahá’ís themselves, in classes and through precepts, that love of God, and consequently of men, is the essential foundation of every religion, our own included. A greater degree of love will produce a greater unity, because it enables people to bear with each other, to be patient and forgiving.”

(“Directives from the Guardian”, p. 75. Cited from “U.S. Bahá’í News”. February, 1945, p. 3.)

3. “The Master unceasingly emphasized the importance of unity among the friends, and, if anything, it is of even greater importance in this present chaotic state of the world than it was in His days. The people are longing for an example — proof that harmony and love can actually exist in a community — and it is one of the primary duties of the Bahá’ís to demonstrate these great principles in their relations with each other.”

(“Unfolding Destiny: The Messages from the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith to the Bahá’í Community of the British Isles”. London: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1981, p. 445.)

4. “Our duty as Bahá’ís is to build up such a love and unity within our own ranks that the people will be attracted by this example to the Cause.”

(“Unfolding Destiny: The Messages from the Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith to the Bahá’í Community of the British Isles”, p. 447.)

5. “If we Bahá’ís cannot attain to cordial unity among ourselves, then we fail to realize the main purpose for which the Báb, Bahá’u’lláh and the Beloved Master lived and suffered.

“In order to achieve this cordial unity one of the first essentials insisted on by Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is that we resist the natural tendency to let our attention dwell on the faults and failings of others rather than on our own. Each of us is responsible for one life only, and that is our own.”

(“Living the Life”. London: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1974, p. 10.)

6. “Most important of all is that love and unity should prevail in the Bahá’í Community, as this is what people are most longing for in the present dark state of the world. Words without the living example will never be sufficient to breathe hope into the hearts of a disillusioned and often cynical generation.”

(“Living the Life”, pp. 23-24.)

7. “...If between the friends true love — based on the love of God—could become manifest, the Cause would spread very rapidly. Love is the standard which must govern the conduct of one believer towards another. The administrative order does not change this, but unfortunately sometimes the friends confuse the two, and try to be a whole spiritual assembly, — with the discipline and justice and impartiality that body must show, — to each other, instead of being forgiving, loving and patient to each other as individuals.”

(“Lights of Guidance: A Bahá’í Reference File”. New Delhi: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1994, p. 404.)

8. “The Guardian feels very strongly that everywhere, throughout the entire Bahá’í World, the believers have got to master and follow the principles of their divinely laid down Administrative Order. They will never solve their problems by departing from the correct procedure... The Bahá’ís have got to learn to live up to the laws of Bahá’u’lláh which are infinitely higher, more exacting and more perfect than those the world is at present familiar with. Running away, fighting with each other, fostering dissension, is not going to advance...any...Community; all it is going to do is to bring Bahá’u’lláh’s plans and work to a standstill until such time as the believers *unite* to serve Him, or new and more dedicated souls arise to take their place.”

(“Dawn of a New Day”, p. 129. To the N.S.A. of India.)

9. “Regarding the matter of Mrs. ... and the inharmony that seems to exist among certain of the friends in ...: when Bahá’ís permit the dark forces of the world to enter into their own relationships within the Faith they gravely jeopardize its progress; it is the paramount duty of the believers, the Local Assemblies, and particularly the National Spiritual Assembly to foster harmony, understanding and love amongst the friends. All should be ready and willing to set aside every personal sense of grievance — justified or unjustified — for the good of the Cause, because the people will never embrace it until they see in its community life mirrored what is so conspicuously lacking the world: love and unity.”

(“From a letter dated 13 May 1945 to a National Spiritual Assembly, quoted from: Issues Concerning Community Functioning; a memorandum prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, dated February 1993”.)

10. “Bahá’u’lláh has given the promise that in every Assembly where unity and harmony prevail, there His glorious spirit will not only be present, but will animate, sustain and guide all the friends in all their deliberations.

“It is to unity that the Guardian has been continually calling the friends: For where a united will exists, nothing can effectively oppose and hamper the forces of constructive development.”

(“From a letter dated 17 November 1933 to an individual believer”. Cited from “Directives from the Guardian”, New Delhi: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1973, p. 5.)

From the Universal House of Justice

1. “It is important to note, however, that individuals who wish to present their views should do so in a way compatible with the Bahá’í spirit of consultation. It sometimes happens that a believer insists on expounding his views at Bahá’í meetings, and frequently disrupts such gatherings, and may even display such behaviour in the presence of non-Bahá’ís. If he stubbornly persists in this conduct, despite exhortations and warnings given to him by the proper Bahá’í institutions, he will somehow have to be prevented from taking the law into his own hands and jeopardizing Bahá’í interests. When differences such as these arise, it is important that frank and loving consultation between the person concerned and the Local Spiritual Assembly, and if need be the National Spiritual Assembly, should take place, or perhaps the institution of the Counsellors could help resolve the problem.”

(“From a letter dated 3 August 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer, quoted from: Issues Concerning Community Functioning; A memorandum prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, dated February 1993”.)

2. “The aggressiveness and competitiveness which animate a dominantly capitalist culture; the partisanship inherent in a fervidly democratic system; the suspicion of public-policy institutions and the skepticism towards established authority ingrained in the political attitude of the people and which trace their origins to the genesis of American society; the cynical disregard of the moderating principles and rules of civilized human relationships resulting from an excessive liberalism and its immoral consequences — such unsavoury characteristics inform entrenched habits of American life, which imperceptibly at first but more obviously in the long run have come to exert too great a sway over the manner of management of the Bahá’í community and over the behaviour of portions of its rank and file in relation to the Cause. This unwholesome influence must be arrested by immediate, deliberate effort — an effort which must surely begin with your Assembly itself. Further accommodation of it will severely impede the progress of your community, despite the abundant possibilities of an imminent breakthrough.”

(“From a letter dated 19 May 1994 by the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States”, para. 28.)

3. “The guarantee of well-being and success in all your endeavours to serve the Cause of God can be stated in one word: unity. It is the alpha and omega of all Bahá’í objectives. Among the first admonitions addressed to National Spiritual Assemblies by Shoghi Effendi was the following assertion: ‘It is, I firmly believe, of the utmost urgent importance that, with unity of purpose and action firmly established in our midst, and with every trace of animosity and mistrust of the past banished from our hearts, we should form one united front, and combat, wisely and tactfully, every force that might darken the spirit of the Movement, cause division in its ranks, and narrow it by dogmatic sectarian belief.’”

(“From a letter dated 19 May 1994 by the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States”, para. 29.)

4. “Your National Assembly and the local Assemblies must not react automatically to every mistake, but distinguish between those that are self-correcting with the passage of time and do no particular harm to the community and those which require Assembly intervention. Related to this is the tendency of the friends to criticize each other at the slightest provocation, whereas the Teachings call upon them to encourage each other. Such tendencies are of course motivated by a deep love for the Faith, a desire to see it free of any flaw. But human beings are not perfect. The local Assemblies and the friends must be helped through your example and through loving counsel to refrain from such a pattern of criticism, which stunts the growth and development of the community.... The Cause is not so fragile that a degree of mistakes cannot be tolerated.”

(“From a letter dated 19 May 1994 by the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States”, para. 50.)

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- ⁵⁸ The Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1976, p. 77.
- ⁵⁹ *Epistle to the Son of the Wolf*, p. 41.
- ⁶⁰ Howard Colby Ives, *Portals to Freedom*. New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1937, p. 37.
- ⁶¹ *ibid.*, p. 40.
- ⁶² *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 30.
- ⁶³ J. William Pfeiffer and Judith a Pfeiffer, *Learned Behavior Profile: Self*. San Diego: University Associates, Inc., 1990, p. 21.
- ⁶⁴ *Excellence in All Things*. A compilation of extracts from the Bahá'í Writings, Comp. the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice. rev. ed. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1989, pp. 368-371.
- ⁶⁵ The Universal House of Justice, from a letter dated 19 May 1994 to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, paragraph # 50.
- ⁶⁶ *Star of the West*, Vol. no. 6, pp. 43-45.
- ⁶⁷ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 265.
- ⁶⁸ *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh Revealed After the Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, pp. 172-173.
- ⁶⁹ *The National Convention*. A Statement and Compilation, Prepared by the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, December 1992. Printed by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Alaska, p. 3, #5. Postscript in the handwriting of Shoghi Effendi appended to a letter dated 13 April 1927 written on his behalf to a Local Spiritual Assembly.
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- ⁷¹ Universal House of Justice, Ridván letter to the Bahá'ís of the World, 152 BE, paragraph # 7.
- ⁷² The Universal House of Justice, Printed in, *Canadian Bahá'í News*, November, 1968.
- ⁷³ *Excellence in All Things*, p. 2, # 5.
- ⁷⁴ *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, p. 77.
- ⁷⁵ *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 21.
- ⁷⁶ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Memorials of the Faithful*. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971, p. 85.
- ⁷⁷ National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, *Developing Distinctive Bahá'í Communities*, Guidelines for Spiritual Assemblies. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1989, p. 3.5.
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- ⁷⁹ The Universal House of Justice, *The Continental Boards of Counselors*. Letters, Extracts from Letters, and Cables from The Universal House of Justice. Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1981, from a letter dated 1 October 1969 to The Continental Boards of Counselors and National Spiritual Assemblies, p. 37.
- ⁸⁰ *Bahá'í Administration*, p. 38.
- ⁸¹ *The Local Spiritual Assembly*. A Compilation. Comp. The Universal House of Justice, Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1970, p. 16.

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- ⁸⁵ From a letter written on the Guardian's behalf to the Hands of the Cause of God, dated 7 June 1954.
- ⁸⁶ *Bahá'í Prayers*. USA Bahá'í Publishing Committee, 1929, p. 33.
- ⁸⁷ *The Promulgation of Universal Peace: Talks Delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá During His Visit to the United States and Canada in 1912*, p. 171.
- ⁸⁸ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 200.
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- ⁹⁰ *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 288.
- ⁹¹ *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 20.
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