

The Destiny of America

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September 30, 2024

To the American Bahá'í community

Beloved Friends and Co-workers,

This is a time of great historical consequence for all humanity. The forces set in motion by the advent of Bahá'u'lláh, the Promised One of All Ages, acting both within and outside the community of His avowed followers, are swiftly gaining momentum. Surely it is not difficult for any of us to discern that a storm is gathering on the horizon, signaling an impending climax that must, sooner or later, revolutionize world affairs.

This is a theme that has long permeated the statements of the Universal House of Justice. Its most recent assessment of the current condition of the world came in this year's Ridván message, that "...with every passing day, we see too the condition of the world grow more desperate, its divisions more severe. The escalating tensions within societies and between nations affect peoples and places in a myriad ways."

To recognize this is to acknowledge the profound moral imperative faced by the peoples of the world, and most especially by the followers of Bahá'u'lláh. The House of Justice continues:

This demands from every conscientious soul a response. We are all too aware that the community of the Greatest Name cannot expect to be unaffected by the travails of society. Yet, though it is affected by these travails, it is not confused by them; it is saddened by humanity's sufferings, but not paralysed by them. Heartfelt concern must prompt sustained effort to build communities that offer hope in place of despair, unity in place of conflict.

Needless to say, our own country is mired in these same difficulties. Indeed, whatever its material achievements may be, it is clear that American society is still very far from reflecting the spirit and splendor of the teachings of

Bahá'u'lláh. This fact, however, should not in any way diminish our faith in the high destiny ordained by Him for this country, nor the indispensable part His followers must play in achieving it.

America to be the Standard-Bearer

In the following passage from the letter known to us as "America and the Most Great Peace," Shoghi Effendi recalled some of the many statements of 'Abdu'l-Bahá attesting to the future of the North American continent and the American nation:

"The continent of America," He announced in a Tablet unveiling His Divine Plan to the believers residing in the North-Eastern States of the American Republic, "is in the eyes of the one true God the land wherein the splendors of His light shall be revealed, where the mysteries of His Faith shall be unveiled, where the righteous will abide and the free assemble." "May this American democracy," He Himself, while in America, was heard to remark, "be the first nation to establish the foundation of international agreement. May it be the first nation to proclaim the unity of mankind. May it be the first to unfurl the standard of the 'Most Great Peace'... The American people are indeed worthy of being the first to build the tabernacle of the great peace and proclaim the oneness of mankind... May America become the distributing center of spiritual enlightenment and all the world receive this heavenly blessing. For America has developed powers and capacities greater and more wonderful than other nations... May the inhabitants of this country become like angels of heaven with faces turned continually toward God. May all of them become servants of the omnipotent One. May they rise from their present material attainments to such a height that heavenly illumination may stream from this center to all the peoples of the world... This American nation is equipped and empowered to accomplish that which will adorn the pages of history, to become the envy of the world and be blest in both the East and the West for the triumph of its people... The American continent gives

signs and evidences of very great advancement. Its future is even more promising, for its influence and illumination are far-reaching. It will lead all nations spiritually."

And further, there are these wonderful statements about the future victories to be won by the American Bahá'ís:

"The range of your future achievements," He once more affirms, "still remains undisclosed. I fervently hope that in the near future the whole earth may be stirred and shaken by the results of your achievements." "The Almighty," He assures them, "will no doubt grant you the help of His grace, will invest you with the tokens of His might, and will endue your souls with the sustaining power of His holy Spirit." "Be not concerned," He admonishes them, "with the smallness of your numbers, neither be oppressed by the multitude of an unbelieving world... Exert yourselves; your mission is unspeakably glorious. Should success crown your enterprise, America will assuredly evolve into a center from which waves of spiritual power will emanate, and the throne of the Kingdom of God will, in the plenitude of its majesty and glory, be firmly established."

In a subsequent letter, published in book form as *The Advent of Divine Justice*, the Guardian provided further elucidation of these statements and their implications. He made clear that this country was not chosen to play a preponderating role in the birth of the coming New World Order by virtue of any inherent excellence or special merit. Just as Iran had been chosen for the appearance of the Twin Manifestations of God for this Age because of its unrivaled decadence, so too had this country been chosen due to its own lamentable spiritual and social deficiencies:

"It is precisely by reason of the patent evils which, notwithstanding its other admittedly great characteristics and achievements, an excessive and binding materialism has unfortunately engendered within it that the Author of their Faith and the Center of His Covenant have singled it out to become the standard-bearer of the New World Order

envisaged in their writings. It is by such means as this that Bahá'u'lláh can best demonstrate to a heedless generation His almighty power to raise up from the very midst of a people, immersed in a sea of materialism, a prey to one of the most virulent and long-standing forms of racial prejudice, and notorious for its political corruption, lawlessness and laxity in moral standards, men and women who, as time goes by, will increasingly exemplify those essential virtues of self-renunciation, of moral rectitude, of chastity, of indiscriminating fellowship, of holy discipline, and of spiritual insight that will fit them for the preponderating share they will have in calling into being that World Order and that World Civilization of which their country, no less than the entire human race, stands in desperate need."

A Still More Superb Mission

From such statements as these it is apparent that the destinies of America and the Bahá'ís of this country are closely intertwined. Our beloved Guardian made clear that our work to transform this country would necessarily evolve over the course of successive stages. For many decades following the revelation by 'Abdu'l-Bahá of *The Tablets of the Divine Plan*, a primary mission was the spread of the Faith to territories and nations around the world. This is not to say that there was no emphasis on teaching on the homefront, but the need of the time was to devote significant human and material resources to the international arena.

In addition, Shoghi Effendi explained in *The Advent of Divine Justice* that the American Bahá'í community was as yet too small to exert any great impact on the nation as a whole. The emphasis, then, was to do everything possible to align the Bahá'í community itself as closely as possible with the high principles and standards of the Faith. Yet, he foresaw a time when, our international mission having been accomplished, another more glorious mission would await us:

"And who knows but that when this colossal task has been accomplished a greater, a still more superb mission, incomparable in its splendor, and foreordained for them by

Bahá'u'lláh, may not be thrust upon them? The glories of such a mission are of such dazzling splendor, the circumstances attending it so remote, and the contemporary events with the culmination of which it is so closely knit in such a state of flux, that it would be premature to attempt, at the present time, any accurate delineation of its features. Suffice it to say that out of the turmoil and tribulations of these "latter years" opportunities undreamt of will be born, and circumstances unpredictable created, that will enable, nay impel, the victorious prosecutors of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Plan, to add, through the part they will play in the unrolling of the New World Order, fresh laurels to the crown of their servitude to the threshold of Bahá'u'lláh."

Dear friends, we cannot within the limited space of this letter recount the full range of statements indicating the sacredness and importance of the tasks ahead. Nor can we even begin to describe the achievements that have led to this moment, the main features of which are so beautifully conveyed in previous messages of the Universal House of Justice. We can only briefly refer to them as a means of understanding the prospects before us. Two stand out in particular. In its message to the Bahá'ís of North America on the occasion of the centenary of the revelation by 'Abdu'l-Bahá of the first of *The Tablets of the Divine Plan*, the House of Justice shared that our era of international effort had come to an end and that a new mission now beckons:

The tasks confronting you are not identical with those of an earlier age. With the international spread of the Faith largely concluded, demands on you are now most pressing on the homefront. The process of entry by troops that emerged so tenuously in the Ten Year Crusade, and was fostered in the decades that followed, is now being extended through a sound process of community building in center after center in all those countries and territories that 'Abdu'l-Bahá marked out so long ago. Your sister communities, so many of which you helped to establish, are now mature, and you stand with them ready to take on the sterner challenges that lie ahead. The

movement of your clusters to the farthest frontiers of learning will usher in the time anticipated by Shoghi Effendi at the start of your collective exertions, when the communities you build will directly combat and eventually eradicate the forces of corruption, of moral laxity, and of ingrained prejudice eating away at the vitals of society."

And in its message to the Bahá'ís of the world dated November 28, 2023, we find a new vista opening before us:

"In *The Advent of Divine Justice*, Shoghi Effendi explained to the Bahá'ís of America that, given the restricted size of their community and the limited influence it wielded, they must focus, at that time, on its own growth and development as it learned to apply the Teachings. He promised, however, that the time would come when they would be called upon to engage their fellow citizens in a process of working for the healing and betterment of their nation. That time has now come. And it has come not only for the Bahá'ís of America, but for the Bahá'ís of the world, as the society-building power inherent in the Faith is released in ever-greater measures."

Advancing Within an Evolving Framework

We need to now understand, embrace, and pursue the work given to us for this stage in our development; that is, to advance our clusters to the farthest frontiers of learning. In this spirit, we offer the following thoughts for your consideration.

It is essential that we avoid the frustrations and pitfalls that will inevitably arise from involvement in activities that are not in keeping with the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings. However urgent the challenges, we understand that our means must be harmonious with our ends, and we therefore avoid succumbing to the political partisanship, divisiveness, and polarization that increasingly characterize the public sphere.

Fifty years ago, the Universal House of Justice had this to say about addressing the long-standing suffering of human society:

“... The principal cause of this suffering, which one can witness wherever one turns, is the corruption of human morals and the prevalence of prejudice, suspicion, hatred, untrustworthiness, selfishness and tyranny among men. It is not merely material well-being that people need. What they desperately need is to know how to live their lives—they need to know who they are, to what purpose they exist, and how they should act towards one another; and, once they know the answers to these questions they need to be helped to gradually apply these answers to everyday behavior. ...”

“Because of such an attitude, and also because of our refusal to become involved in politics, Bahá’ís are often accused of holding aloof from the “real problems” of their fellowmen. But when we hear this accusation let us not forget that those who make it are usually idealistic materialists to whom material good is the only “real” good, whereas we know that the working of the material world is merely a reflection of spiritual conditions and until the spiritual conditions can be changed there can be no lasting change for the better in material affairs. “

“We should also remember that most people have no clear concept of the sort of world they wish to build, nor how to go about building it. Even those who are concerned to improve conditions are therefore reduced to combating every apparent evil that takes their attention. Willingness to fight against evils, whether in the form of conditions or embodied in evil men, has thus become for most people the touchstone by which they judge a person’s moral worth. Bahá’ís, on the other hand, know the goal they are working towards and know what they must do, step by step, to attain it. Their whole energy is directed towards the building of the good, a good which has such a positive strength that in the face of it the multitude of evils—which are in essence negative—will fade away and be no more. To enter into the quixotic tournament of demolishing one by

one the evils in the world is, to a Bahá’í, a vain waste of time and effort. His whole life is directed towards proclaiming the Message of Bahá’u’lláh, reviving the spiritual life of his fellowmen, uniting them in a divinely created World Order, and then, as the Order grows in strength and influence, he will see the power of that Message transforming the whole human society and progressively solving the problems and removing the injustices which have so long bedeviled the world.”

Surely this passage is even more relevant today than it was then, especially in the age of social media.

The methods and instruments of the Plan are now well known to us all, as is the evolving framework in which they operate. This framework encompasses a wide range of activities—distinct, yet closely related—for the expansion and consolidation of the Bahá’í community, social action, and engagement in the discourses of society. In cluster after cluster, these dimensions must be nurtured in a systematic and coherent manner so that they come to include steadily increasing numbers of people and exert ever-greater impact on the life of society.

The notion of an evolving framework indicates the importance of learning. No two clusters will advance in precisely the same manner, nor at the same pace. Yet all of those that have experienced significant growth have one element in common—the capacity for learning. This capacity is expressed in the ability to understand, in the light of the guidance, the path of growth and development that has brought us to where we are; a realistic assessment of our current reality; and a clear vision of where we now need to go, together with the practical steps needed to get there. To do these things effectively requires an attitude of humility that stems from the realization that all have insights to share, talents to contribute, and experiences to draw upon in our common effort. It requires the frank acknowledgement that we are all striving to gain the capacity to reflect in all aspects of our individual and collective lives the beauty of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings. We therefore accept the need to learn what is effective and drop what is not. We build

on strengths instead of focusing on weaknesses. We refuse to adopt a success/failure mode of thinking and the freneticism that inevitably accompanies it. We avoid the extremes of irresponsible freedom and rigid orthodoxy. We consult with each other in a loving and sincere spirit of search for truth. In sum, we rely on proven experience in applying the teachings to show us the way forward. And all the while, we remain true to the guidance of the House of Justice in illuminating our path.

Learning entails not so much a focus on numbers as on the underlying processes of growth. This is not to say that numbers are unimportant. We certainly want the number of activities to grow, but we also want to ensure that they are having the society-building impact envisioned by the House of Justice. This is the only way in which growth can truly be sustained or accelerated. For example, the same few people in a cluster might increase their own efforts from cycle to cycle, yielding an initial increase in core activities. Yet there is a limit to how far that can go unless their efforts serve the more fundamental purpose of assisting others to also become effective protagonists in the transformation of society. If this is not done, then the progress of the Faith will inevitably be stifled.

Similarly, we certainly want and need an increase in the number of avowed followers of Bahá'u'lláh. However, if we focus only on enrollments as our measure of success, then we are tempted to forego other essential aspects of the process of community building. Instead, we are learning to welcome larger and larger numbers of people to immediately join us in the work of transforming our communities. As we have often seen, many such people quickly come to recognize the station of Bahá'u'lláh and readily join the Faith. Others, as they become more deeply engaged, will more gradually become attracted to Bahá'u'lláh and His teachings to the point where, as the House of Justice describes it, they stand at the threshold of embracing the Faith. We must learn how to then wisely invite them to cross that threshold as the next natural step in their spiritual path. There can be no doubt that, over time, we will see multitudes of souls taking this journey. While others may not ever formally embrace the

Cause, all can still serve together with us and share in witnessing the society-building power of the Faith manifest itself in ever-greater measures.

Every space that we create, whether in a children's class, a junior youth group, a devotional gathering, a study circle, or any other, can be considered as an environment in which we are transitioning from the Old to the New World Order. Each of these, no matter how modestly it may begin, can be seen as a place of spiritual refuge for our fellow citizens. All are distinguished for their spiritual atmosphere, sense of loving inclusion, and spirit of service. As we sustain and multiply them, they will become havens for ever-larger populations. By creating such communities dedicated to the application of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, we will be pursuing a process of transforming American society that will not falter. A letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi asserted, "Until the public sees in the Bahá'í Community a true pattern, in action, of something better than it already has, it will not respond to the Faith in large numbers." It is this very pattern that we are now laboring to create.

A Profound Alteration of Thought

Of the three evil tendencies identified by Shoghi Effendi, all of which must be eradicated from the fabric of our society, that of racial prejudice was identified by him as "the most vital and challenging issue." We have been the fortunate recipients of abundant guidance from the Universal House of Justice as to how we are to address this challenge within the context of the current series of Plans. Most notable is its letter to the Bahá'ís of the United States, dated July 22, 2020. In this landmark message, we are reminded of Shoghi Effendi's statement that the road to eliminating racism will be "long and thorny" and "beset with pitfalls." We are challenged to consider the "demanding implications" of the principle of the oneness of humanity "for the profound alteration of thought and action required at this time." While acknowledging the insights that many people of goodwill are bringing to the quest for racial justice, we are reminded that we must assess them in the light of the Faith's teachings,

moving forward in a posture of learning and a spirit of unity. Above all, we are reminded that the issue is essentially moral and spiritual in character. As such, it requires a spiritual remedy:

“Ultimately, the power to transform the world is effected by love, love originating from the relationship with the divine, love ablaze among members of a community, love extended without restriction to every human being. This divine love, ignited by the Word of God, is disseminated by enkindled souls through intimate conversations that create new susceptibilities in human hearts, open minds to moral persuasion, and loosen the hold of biased norms and social systems so that they can gradually take on a new form in keeping with the requirements of humanity’s age of maturity. You are channels for this divine love; let it flow through you to all who cross your path. Infuse it into every neighborhood and social space in which you move to build capacity to canalize the society-building power of Bahá’u’lláh’s Revelation. There can be no rest until the destined outcome is achieved.”

Beloved friends! We are all aware that the processes leading to world peace necessarily move forward in fits and starts, in alternating modes of crisis and victory. No one can say with certainty how they will play out, nor predict the sequence of events, nor over what span of time they will reach their climax. What we do know is that, however great the trials ahead, the ultimate outcome of a divine civilization is ordained and certain.

The Youth Must Soar

We wish now to convey a special message to the younger members of our community. In *The Advent of Divine Justice*, our beloved Shoghi Effendi addressed these words to the youth of that generation:

“No greater demonstration can be given to the peoples of both continents of the youthful vitality and the vibrant power animating the life, and the institutions of the nascent Faith of Bahá’u’lláh than an intelligent, persistent, and effective

participation of the Bahá’í youth, of every race, nationality, and class, in both the teaching and administrative spheres of Bahá’í activity. Through such a participation the critics and enemies of the Faith, watching with varying degrees of skepticism and resentment, the evolutionary processes of the Cause of God and its institutions, can best be convinced of the indubitable truth that such a Cause is intensely alive, is sound to its very core, and its destinies in safe keeping.”

The Universal House of Justice has for decades consistently called upon the youth to make their full and indispensable contribution to the teaching effort. In recent years, it has noted the remarkable capacities and qualities of leadership now emerging among the younger members of the community. For example, in the Ridván 2021 message to the Bahá’ís of the world, we find the following:

“One of the most striking and inspiring features of this twenty-five-year period has been the service rendered by Bahá’í youth, who with faith and valour have assumed their rightful place in the forefront of the community’s efforts. As teachers of the Cause and educators of the young, as mobile tutors and homefront pioneers, as cluster coordinators and members of Bahá’í agencies, youth on five continents have arisen to serve their communities with devotion and sacrifice. The maturity they have demonstrated, in the discharge of duties upon which depends the advancement of the Divine Plan, is expressive of their spiritual vitality and their commitment to safeguarding humanity’s future.”

Later that same year, the House of Justice, in its December 30 message to the Boards of Counselors, called attention to the need for youth to support the institute in particular: “They [youth] should seize every opportunity—in their schools and universities, and in spaces dedicated to work, family, or social interaction—to encourage more and more souls to benefit from the institute’s programmes.” It is clear from these statements, as well as from the historical record, that the contributions of the youth have always been essential to the

progress of the Cause of God. Today, the Universal House of Justice has again reminded us of the place they must occupy in the vanguard of service: "All must surge, but the youth must soar."

Through Living Sacrifice

Let us then address the urgent needs of our generation with renewed determination. Around us we see a society that is quickly losing its bearings. Trust in the institutions of society, in traditional sources of information and moral guidance, in political and civic leaders, and in each other, is rapidly disappearing. The voices of extremism and opposition are on the rise, while the voices of moderation are drowned out. Yet with this we also see an increasing thirst for a vision capable of transcending these divisions, and a source of truth upon which people can anchor their hearts and their efforts. There are most certainly multitudes of well-meaning, high-minded people in this country who sincerely desire to have a just and peaceful society. The fullest realization of their aspirations will appear as they, and our nation as a whole, become imbued with the spirit of the Revelation of God for today.

"What 'oppression,'" writes Bahá'u'lláh, "is more grievous than that a soul seeking the truth, and wishing to attain unto the knowledge of God, should know not where to go for it and from whom to seek it?" Our own spiritual development is far from complete, but further progress now requires us to join hands with many others. We who have access to that truth must now, in a genuine spirit of humility and respect, invite our brothers and sisters throughout this land to learn together how to apply it for our common salvation.

With this in mind, the Counselors and the National Spiritual Assembly are calling upon the Regional Bahá'í Councils to organize in the coming months a series of conferences patterned after the global conferences that launched the current Plan. In addition, they are being asked to organize special gatherings for youth. In the same spirit as the previous gatherings, these will be open to all and intended to widen the circle of those who are involved in the life of the Bahá'í community. In

all of these we will, inspired by the themes of this letter, center our thoughts on immediate action and what now needs to be done to fulfill the goals of the Nine Year Plan.

Our task today is no less glorious than that which faced the earliest followers of our Faith. Our lives must be characterized by the same degree of consecration and sacrifice that illumined the annals of the Heroic Age. As Shoghi Effendi stated:

"The community of the organized promoters of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh in the American continent—the spiritual descendants of the dawn-breakers of an heroic Age, who by their death proclaimed the birth of that Faith—must, in turn, usher in, not by their death but through living sacrifice, that promised World Order, the shell ordained to enshrine that priceless jewel, the world civilization, of which the Faith itself is the sole begetter."

May the devotion, unity, and vigor of our efforts vindicate his highest hopes for us. Be assured of our deepest love and unceasing prayers for each and every one of you.

With warmest Bahá'í love,
NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF
THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED
STATES