

# **THE NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES FACING THE BAHA'I COMMUNITY**

Peter Khan, August 2002

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Dear friends, it is a great pleasure for Janet and myself to be here in Adelaide at this time and to be able to meet with you this afternoon. As some of you may know I used to live in Adelaide in 1955 and at various times for a total of two years between 1955 and the early part of 1958. So much of this area is familiar to me; it has obviously changed enormously in 4 to 5 decades. Janet and I arrived in Adelaide on Friday afternoon and we spent yesterday largely walking around the city and up to North Adelaide and seeing various places, which were particularly meaningful to me from my period of residence in the greater Adelaide area. It is with a sense of nostalgia then that I returned to Adelaide and to have the pleasure of meeting with you. As Counselor David Chittleborough mentioned I, at present, Janet and I are serving in the Holy Land. We have been there for almost 19 years and I've been a member of the Universal House of Justice since March of 1987.

It is clear from what one sees and reads and hears in the news and also from the statements of the Universal House of Justice, particularly in its Ridvan messages, that the world around us is going through a period of turmoil unprecedented in recorded history. A time of great change, disorder, anxiety and unrest. And this condition of society, invading every part of the world is creating for the Baha'is "needs" and "opportunities" the like of which we have not seen before." It is on this subject that I want to take this time to speak to you this afternoon.

I want to speak for some time and then with the permission of the organizers I hope we can have a question and answer period in which I will try to help you with any information I can give you about any question you have about the work of the Faith or its activities or its directions or its needs or whatever and I want to encourage you at that point to feel free to ask any question you wish. But what I want to do is to share with you this afternoon my perspective on what I see to be some of the needs and opportunities facing the members of the worldwide Baha'i community, Australia included. Generally what is a "need" for us is at one and the same time an "opportunity".

We have needs to resist the negative influences of an increasingly disordered society: to avoid becoming caught up in its disorder, its tensions, its anxieties, its extremism. And we have great opportunities in this time of turmoil and transition. We have great opportunities to attract others to the cause of God through our attitudes and our behaviors.

My perception is that there are 3 major issues, which we as Baha'is need to address as this particularly pertinent time in human history. And I want to go through these three issues one by one and to share with you my perception of the needs and opportunities, which each one of these three issues in turn presents to us.

The first point I want to make, the first of these three issues, is the need and the opportunity for us to acquire more fully and express a Baha'i perspective on world events.

World events are increasingly bombarding our attention. They are causing great fear, great concern and great distraction. As is apparent to anybody who follows at all closely world events through the news or through travel or other ways: the world is in a condition of unprecedented turmoil.

For example the disintegration in the generally accepted functioning of society: Such examples as the extremes of wealth and poverty that are affecting western society and through that the rest of the world; the rise of uncontrolled greed affecting the international and national business communities. The lack of concern or sensitivity about the welfare of others who are deprived, who are suffering, who are ill in terms of their condition in relation to society; corruption in government, one government upon the other around the world. Some governments we observe from my perspective in the Holy Land. Some governments are essentially unable to function because of corruption.

Certain countries of the world, a small but growing number are essentially now ungovernable. Have been reduced to an anarchistic condition such that there is no way in which they can function at a national level. Somalia is of course one particularly pertinent example but not the only one. Corruption in business! corruption in law enforcement! For many, many years sport was free of corruption. Now with drug taking, with bribery and various other illegal activities, even sport, which was in many ways a refuge of recreation, has become tainted by corruption. Violence is increasing all over the world.

Obviously coming from the Holy Land we have a particular perspective on violence because it is all around us in the city of Haifa and in other parts of the Holy Land but it is not confined simply to those countries which make the news. Janet and I return almost every year if possible to a small city called Macay, in central Queensland and we have observed over these 19 years, year after year, Macay become less and less safe. When we arrive each year we are oriented by relatives in Macay as to which parts of the city it is not safe to walk in at night. We have now reached the point where we feel safer walking in Haifa at night than we do in Macay. Let alone in Sydney or riding the trains in Sydney or walking through Hyde Park, or whatever. Even areas of the world that have traditionally been known for their safety are being affected by crime, by violence, by the affect of narcotics, and the like.

The spread of Aids is not only a catastrophe in the world today, but gives indications of a far greater catastrophe to come. There are some countries where 25 percent of the Adult population is HIV positive. And as a result the country is facing the prospect of the whole of a section of its population dying within the next few years. There are countries in the world where aged grandparents are left to bring up children because the parents have been killed by Aids. Villages where you can find no adult and the children are, of the village, are huddled together try to survive, the older ones caring for the younger ones, trying to maintain some kind of agriculture for sustenance and survival.

The religious clergy, traditionally a haven of trust and security and an exponent of traditional values has now been corrupted by scandals involving money, scandals involving pedophilia, scandals involving other kinds of sexual abuse and the like. Society in every country is under tension as a result of racial and in many instances religious prejudices and antagonisms. Extremism is on the rise, irrationality a ruthless attitude towards people of other background, of other faith or of other ethnic group. Increasingly in the world and of course accelerating as a result of the events in the United States of September 11 last year is the rise of fear and apprehension about violence and warfare by terrorists.

The prospect of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons affecting a society has become very real and is a growing source of concern in many parts of the world, not the least of which is the middle east, but not only. Now days if you plan to travel, to the United States or through the United States to Europe, you need to be prepared that at some point you will be asked to take off your shoes and allow them to be x-rayed if you want to board a plane. It is relatively minor inconvenience, but stop and think of what such a thing says about the state of our society that one has to be searched and interrogated before you carry out even the most least minor of events. In Israel we have become accustomed to the fact that when you want to enter a shopping mall or a restaurant or any other place of public gathering: Janet has to open her handbag and have it searched by the guards at the entrance. I have to stand up and hold my hands like this while the guards check that I am not wearing a weapon. And we've become accustomed this and we do it very naturally. We had a very odd experience a few months ago. We went to Germany to Berlin for a very short visit and we found ourselves unconsciously going through this ritual as we entered the departments stores or the various other place of public gathering and this produced a great deal of amazement to the German citizens wondering who these strange people were; wondering why was he going like this and she was opening her handbag.

But it is a measure of the fact that our world has changed tremendously. It is changed in incredible ways. It has happened little by little. Year by year, but those of you who can remember back ten, twenty of thirty years will be well aware of how the degree of disorder and tension and turmoil in the world has increased enormously.

People are reacting to it in a variety of ways. Some people are complacent. They say well lets not get too excited about that it has always been a little like this, its just a little bit worse. Don't worry about it. It will all go away; A refusal to contemplate the reality of the situation and its prospects. There are others who search for magic solutions for panaceas. Who feel: if we just do this it will all finish. If the government adopts this particular policy it will all go away. There are others who embrace an extremist's solution. That matters have reached a point where we must do something very extreme. That is a panacea that will solve it. There is, and I observe it, and the friends who come to the World Center on pilgrimage or as three-day visitors also tell me, that in their societies that the friends or the people around them they find a growing pessimism about the future. A sense of despair, an apocalyptic sense that the civilization is coming to an end. People are talking about the prospect of the descent of another Dark Age, of civilizations on trial and the clash between the Islamic and Christian civilizations leading to the destruction of both of them. And of course there are some who are searching for new paradigms, for new solutions for a whole new way of looking at what is happening in the world.

Well so much for what is going on. What is the Baha'i perspective? I want to remind you of a number of things that you may well be fully aware of but I feel it important to draw these again to your attention because we are going draw these again to your attention because we are going through a very, very challenging time in history and we as Baha'is need to be very clear on certain elements of our religion that are pertinent to the conditions that I have described.

a) The first part of the Baha'i perspective as I understand it, is the realization that what is happening at the world is over all not random. Not accidental, not something the world stumbled into because of erroneous policies of the twentieth or nineteenth centuries. We believe that individuals have freedom of will and are to be held to account for their actions, but our religion also tells us that there is a great plan of God at work in the world. That: that plan of God is moving humanity, like it or not, under the influence of great spiritual forces, to a predetermined destiny. It is not accidental. It is not random.

The future of it is not in doubt. How it gets there, how it happens in the process is unclear and subject to freedom of will. But the world is going through a definite course of transition predestined as part of God's plan for humanity. There is a connection between the promises set out in sacred writings such as the New Testament, the promises of the coming of the Kingdom of God on earth, the promises of world peace, of world unity at a time of an end of the age. There is a definite connection between those prophecies of the Koran, of the Old Testament of the New Testament, the scriptures of Hinduism, of Buddhism and other religions. There is a definite connection between that, and what we are going through today: The great plan of God.

b) Secondly, the Baha'i perspective is that the real fundamental reason for this mess in the world is "irreligion": The failure of humanity to respond the needs of

the age and the decline of true religious commitment and influence. You will find this in no newspaper. You will not read any analysis in the secular society that looks at what's happening in the world and says "Ah it is all due to a decline of a true religious influence" The reasons given in the analysis of the condition of human society are accurate and valid in themselves, but incomplete. Everything one reads one says "yes, well that is true, but how did it get there, where did it come from what are is the origin, what is the step before that?" And our writings tell us that the step before that is the decline of true religious influence. Not religious in terms of commitment or formality or formal acts of devotion and observance, but religion in terms of the influence of spiritual values in individual and social life.

The Baha'i perspective is that what is happening in the world today is the operation of two processes. A process of decline, which I have talked about already and a process of growth and that these two processes are continuing in the world at the present time. The declining process has been spoken of at great length in the writing of Shoghi Effendi. He has also referred to the growing process; the process that is leading us to the unification of nations; to the unity of mankind; to the development of the lesser peace, ultimately through that to the most great peace, to world unity; and to the establishment of the foundation of world civilization. These are two processes at work in the world today. And what is far more significant and far more crucial, is the statement of the Guardian in several places in his writings that these two processes will continue in the future with what he describes as accelerating momentum.

Don't think it is all going to stop and go away in a few years time. Don't think that we are going to return to the nineteen fifties or to a very pleasant tranquil condition of society. The writings of our faith tell us in many places and it has been re-iterated in several of the recent Ridvan messages of the Universal House of Justice that these two process, the process of decline and growth are continuing, will continue in the future, with what Shoghi Effendi calls accelerating momentum. The decline, which we see in the world today, is going to get worse. It is going to get far worse. It is going to accelerate greater and greater and greater and greater. Shoghi Effendi in one of his messages refers to the end of the declining process. And he says it will end with three things: Barbarism, chaos and ultimate extinction.

He also refers to the growing process. It is continuing. It is at work in the world today. It is the hope of the future, it will accelerate become greater and greater become faster and faster, as years go by and it will lead humanity to its salvation - to a salvation of unity of harmony of the growth of a new civilization. What does this mean to us as Baha'is? It means several things. It means firstly that we should not allow ourselves to get caught up in the passions, the apprehensions, the pessimism and despair of the people around us. As the tensions increase in our society so do the passions; so do the strength of voices, so do the appeals for support. It's very, very, very easy for us as Baha'is to become caught up in these passions and tensions and causes because each of them has

certain elements that appeal to our Baha'i conscience. Each of them has something in it that we find ourselves responding to because of the sensitivity engendered in us by our commitment to the Baha'i teachings. And we have to be very, very careful that we don't join in the kind of thinking that is going on by the people around us. The kind of thinking that is reflected in newspapers or in media, or in general conversation. We have to retain our understanding, our vision of where the world is going. Not get dragged down by the people around us.

We need to internalize the Baha'i perspective. Not simply as something we read, something we understand, something we agree with but something that is an inner part of our being so it is reflected naturally in our thinking so whenever we see what is happening in the world we automatically fit it in to our Baha'i perspective of the plan of God, or the process of decline, of the process of growth with accelerating momentum. We realize, as the Universal House of Justice stated in its message *The Promise of World Peace*: That world peace is not only possible, but inevitable. That peace message has been spread all over the world. I don't know how many million copies have been given out in a variety of languages from one end of the earth to the other. And in that peace message you find this statement about world peace "being not only possible but inevitable". And the reaction we get from every part of the world is that the Baha'is are the only ones saying that. We share in common with a growing number of people an ardent yearning, a desire for peace, for harmony. We are not unique in that. Where we are unique is that we are certain to the point of inevitability. We are certain that it is going to come.

It doesn't mean we think it will come easily, It doesn't mean we don't think it will come without trial or turmoil or a great deal of destruction possibly, but we do know as a matter of certainty that it is coming and we Baha'is need to have this internalized in our consciousness so that we are sure of it and that is reflected in our behavior and in our attitude and in our speech. Whenever Baha'is are with others, we will find increasingly people concerned about what is happening in the world. Their concern is almost always at a political level. If this party were in power instead of that party things would be different. If the government of this particular country adopted that particular policy the situation would improve. The problem is caused by this government acting this way and the like. We need not, we need to avoid getting drawn up in political discussion and political controversies but we should not be silent. We should rather help people to redefine the issues concerning them.

To redefine them at a level of fundamental principal, rather than at a superficial level of politics, so they can identify these fundamental principles which are addressed by the Baha'i teachings and by the Baha'i solution. It means we want more and more Baha'is to make a careful and detailed and thorough study of the Baha'i writings on this subject. Of where the world is, where it is going and how it will get from here to there.

This particularly requires a close study of certain books of Shoghi Effendi. His World Order letters in the book World Order of Baha'u'llah and the book Advent of Divine Justice.

We need more Baha'is to study these particular books closely. And they will find if they do that, wonderful, remarkable insights, directly applicable, to what is happening in the world today. Giving insights that you would think, "well Shoghi Effendi is here today and this is what he said yesterday about what is happening in today's news." So pertinent and so relevant are the insights of the Guardian as expressed in these books. It is also important that we be aware of the authentic Baha'i perspective expressed in the writings of the Guardian about the role of the United States of America in the achievement of the divine purpose. I mention this because the American Nation is always and probably always will be the subject of controversy. People for it, people against it, people highly pro America, people highly anti America and the like and it is important that we as Baha'is have a clear understanding of the complex theme of the role of the American nation in the achievement of the goals and the ideals and aims of the Baha'i Faith.

There is a very beautiful passage in Promised Day is Come and I think the second page where Shoghi Effendi refers to our course of action at this time and I want to read it to you. It is, on one hand, it is only one sentence, on the other hand it is a huge sentence. Anyway Shoghi Effendi in that place refers to the titanic upheaval occurring in the world. He says it is comprehensible to those only who have recognized the claim of Baha'u'llah and the Bab, and he says that the Baha'is know full well from whence this upheaval comes and where it will ultimately lead. He then goes on to indicate the attitude and actions to be taken by the Baha'is.

And he sets out 7 things that we should do. They are all this one long sentence, ok. He says that they, the Baha'is, that they:

- 1) Clearly recognize its genesis. In other words they know where it is coming from.
- 2) Secondly are aware of its direction. They know where it is going; there are two processes.
- 3) Thirdly acknowledge its necessity. It is a little difficult; we wish the whole thing would go away. But Shoghi Effendi says we must acknowledge its necessity. It is an organic transition from one condition of society to another.
- 4) Fourthly, observe confidently its mysterious processes. There is an element of serenity, an element of insight of observing confidently its mysterious processes. What I get from that is: don't get all hot and bothered; don't get caught up in all the tensions, and passions and anger and turmoil. Observe confidently its mysterious processes. That was the fourth one.

5) Fifthly, ardently pray for the mitigation of its severity. We are not in the same camp as the apocalyptic people who say "let the whole mess come down. Go for it; let it all crash, good riddance" and things like that. On the contrary, we pray ardently for the mitigation of its severity.

6) Sixthly. Intelligently labor to assuage its fury and we have seen so many Baha'is who are carrying out works of social welfare. Works to ameliorate the condition of society. To bring balm and healing to those who are suffering.

7) And finally the seventh one. He said: "anticipate with undimmed vision, the consummation of the fears and hopes it must necessarily engender." And I call your attention to the phrase "undimmed vision." Obtain a sense of vision to carry us through this difficult period.

That was one of the three issues.

The second two will be a little bit shorter. There are three issues I want to mention as being those issues that I feel are of particular concern to Baha'is all over the world including Australia at the present time.

The second one is that we, as believers need to respond to the condition of the world around us by a conscious and sustained effort to develop a heightened spiritual awareness. We need this heightened spiritual awareness to get us through the time of transition in the world today and what's coming up in the future. If we don't develop it we are going to be swept away. And we see this happening around us; people are being swept away because they have failed to develop this heightened spiritual awareness. It is a familiar theme for people of religious background to say the world is materialistic. We believe it, it is in our writings, all kinds of people say it; you hear it said every day of the week that the world is materialistic.

What does it mean? It means that the people of the world are governing their lives by material values. If you say to a person "what will make you happy?" He or she generally will give you a list of material things connected with their possessions, their home, their means of transportation, their employment, their recreation, their travel or whatever, and that list will be what he or she will say this will make me happy. If you arrange all these things then you don't have to worry about me any more. I'm happy. It is a material expectation of what will be the source of fulfillment and happiness. People evaluate the course of their lives with a materialistic expectation of outcomes. If you say to somebody, what are you planning to do and they will say I am planning to do this. How will you get there? It will be through material values, material effects and material forces taken into account.

Decision-making is based upon a material assessment of what resources one has, what talents one possesses, what access one has to means of implementation. It is accurate but limited and incomplete because it is based upon a material

assessment of creation and what is available to us. Standards of success in the world around us are based upon material considerations. In that sense we are in a society, which is through and through materialistic and we as Baha'is are not against material things. We welcome them; we like to be as comfortable as everybody else is. We enjoy the comforts that life has to offer. It is good. We should not reject it. We are not against it but we recognize that life is a lot more than material things, that the spiritual dimension is far more crucial.

We as Baha'is by the very act of our embracing this religion, becoming part of it, have committed ourselves to a process of spiritual development and awareness. That is part of the contract. That's intrinsically associated with our becoming Baha'is and why do we do this?

We do it to fulfill our purpose in life. We have recognized that we are here on this earth, not to spend seventy or more years enjoying ourselves in material possessions, having a comfortable life from a material perspective, but we are here with a perspective and one of these days we will die, and we will become aware of the worth and value of our lives. We will continue to endure time without end in the next world and we will realize the quality and worth of what we have done in the years on this earth. We are here to fulfill our purpose in life and to prepare ourselves for the inevitability of the world to come beyond death. We are here to provide an example of tranquility and confidence to people around us. And we are here to attract others to the message of God that has been brought by the Bab and Baha'u'llah.

In that sense this time in the history of humanity, this time in our lives, is a time when we are called upon, when there is a great need and opportunity for us to develop a heightened spiritual awareness. How are we to do this? Let us say, yes I want to do it. It makes sense to me. I really want to do this. Then fine! How do we go about it? What approach do we use? The approach is set out in the writings: it seems to rest upon three elements as far as I can see.

The first is our awareness that certain actions we take attract in a mysterious way great spiritual powers to us. It is not something one can characterize very simply. Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha use the analogy of the magnet to describe it. The analogy of the magnet, which is mentioned in several places by Baha'u'llah where he uses the word translated as lodestone. It is further developed by 'Abdu'l-Baha: is used as the word magnet. And as best I understand it as used by Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha: that just as in a magnet, you arrange the little elements making up the magnet to conform to a certain pattern then that pattern attracts a mysterious power that we call the force of magnetism. It is mysterious. You can't see it. If you hold up two magnets, and can wave your hand between them and there is nothing there it encounters but we know the force is there. You let one go and it goes zing and it hits the other one or it is repelled depending on the polarity. So in that sense the force of magnetism is a mysterious means of representing the analogy to the development of our spiritual awareness. We are told that certain actions attract the spiritual power and these are actions called

forth in our writings. Acts of devotion, the obligatory prayers, the other revealed prayers, the process of fasting for nineteen days each year. Acts of immersing oneself in the Holy Writings; acts such as sacrificially contributing to the fund, or paying one's Huququ'llah, participation in one's community life; endeavors to teach the faith.

These and many other things are actions, which we are promised in our writings will attract great spiritual powers. That seems to be the foundations of the three elements of developing a heightened spiritual awareness.

The second of the three elements is the process orientation with which the Baha'i teachings are suffused and this process orientation is very simple and very straightforward. It tells us that if you make a small effort, that act of making an effort will be reinforced by the spiritual powers attracted to you. Those spiritual powers will strengthen you and enable you to make a greater effort. That greater effort will further attract an even larger measure of spiritual powers and will enable you to go even further and so it will go on. As a result we find again and again in the example of 'Abdu'l-Baha. The admonition "Make a start, make an effort. And all will come good. Just get started. Just get going. And this process of magnetic attraction of spiritual powers reinforcing one's intrinsic effort leading to greater strength of soul and so on will continue the process orientation.

Lamentably it is not quite as simple as that. If it were we would all be floating up in the sky, we would be so spiritual. It's not as simple as all that because the world is designed to include tests. Anybody who makes an effort gets tested. Lets say you make a commitment and your commitment is that you are going to read twenty pages of the writings every night. It is not very hard to get started. Tonight, read twenty pages, tomorrow night twenty pages, Tuesday night twenty pages, Wednesday something comes up, Thursday you're tired. Friday night you promise yourself that you will read forty pages on Saturday and so forth and so on. You're tested because you're human.

We as Baha'is do not believe in an independent force of evil, but the writings personify evil to its referral to our own material nature, and the term Satan is used in the Baha'i writings not as if we believe in an independent force of evil or some nasty fellow called Satan who is lurking around in the dark where he can get you, but rather as a dramatic personalization of our own material nature. And there is a passage in the writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha- "Satan will appear to you in the guise you find most attractive." Satan will appear to each one of us in the guise we find most attractive. We will be tested and we will be tested in the area on in which we are weakest. There are lots and lots of things that I can be tested upon which will have no effect on me but that is not a test. Satan does not appear to me in a form that I find unattractive. I just ignore it. We are tested in areas in we are most vulnerable in which we are most attracted and that is something that we have to deal with in this process of making an effort, attracting the spirit, of being reinforced to a greater effort, and on into the future. The process of developing a heightened spiritual awareness rests on the magnetic principle on the process

orientation of reinforced effort and its third element is that of periodic re-evaluation.

Periodically stopping and saying to oneself "how am I doing?" what corrections should I make. What adjustments should I make? Mercifully we are not a religion that has confession in it. We don't confess to any other individual, we don't come to be judged so that another person says you are doing good, you are doing bad you are doing indifferent, but we are told we are to bring ourselves to account, we are told to bring ourselves to account daily: To review, to make corrections, to make a renewed commitment. On a daily basis we have the 19-day rhythm in our Baha'i lives. We have the annual period of re-evaluation and renewal during the time of the fast. One nineteen day month in the solar year. There are these periodicities to our renewal, our re-evaluation. And I believe that if each one of us will make this renewed commitment to heightened spiritual awareness it will strengthen us to deal with the problems of the world around us. To resist the dangerous forces to which we are exposed and will at the same time will develop us in a way which will attract others to our religion and will help traverse its period of turmoil and difficulty more quickly.

The final of the three points that I want to mention before I stop and I want to take some questions. That is the need and the opportunity for us as Baha'is, in Australia and throughout the world - to make a greater effort to foster interpersonal relationships. The Baha'i writings provide invaluable means and guidance for interpersonal relations. Whether it is on a one to one basis, whether it is in the family, within the marriage, within the local, the national or the international community.

Our religion, to an extent unprecedented in the whole history of human society, in the history of religions, our religion has a lot to say on how human beings should relate to each other. And when you look around you in the world today one of the most pressing needs arises from the inability of human beings to relate to each other in a fair, a just or harmonious manner. You look at the contention and the division in society between factions and groups and races and ethnic elements and religious groups and ages and educated and uneducated and all kinds of things. Increasingly on a national level, country after country is becoming politically crippled by its lack of consensus on national policies. The party in power proposes certain course of action; the party in opposition says no way it is the worse possible thing you could possibly do. There is a growing fractionalization of what was the two party system throughout the world --- the three party system, the four party the five party, coalitions which are unstable, dealing and betrayal and other coalitions forming the lack of consensus at a national level in the society of more and more countries in the world is leading to weakness, paralysis and inability to accomplish acts of collective will.

The breakdown of marriages represents the failure to foster interpersonal relations at the most intimate level. The tensions in families, the disintegration of family relationships, the alienation of children from parents, parents from

grandparents and the like; close relations into distant relations and it is all the part of the breakdown of interpersonal relations.

The loneliness increasingly affecting individuals, people who feel isolated, who feel they don't have any friends, that nobody cares for them, that no body is interested in if they live or die or if they are sick or they are healthy, all of this is a derivative of a society of every country in the world where there is this failure to foster interpersonal relationship. Tensions within the work place! Factions within the organization, of a working environment. Office politics. The destructive relationships between various elements of a large organization whether it is a business or any other kind of organization are all derivative to this failure to foster interpersonal relationships.

We have these Baha'i principles of interpersonal relationships, have been consolidated under one heading, and that is where the problem has arisen. We have taken that heading and applied it to one small element of human relations, not realizing it applies to a whole lot of others.

That heading is the word "consultation". The word "Baha'i consultation" means quite a lot to us, and the unfortunate thing is that we have put it in a little glass case and say "to be opened and used in case of LSA meetings" Whereas in fact the process of consultation is of general and widespread applicability. It applies not simply in the rarefied atmosphere of a Local or National Spiritual Assembly or the State Convention or the Regional Convention or the National Convention or anything like that, it applies to a whole range of human relations, one to one, groups, families, and so on. What does it mean? The process of consultation I am sure you are all very familiar with it. Let me quickly review what I mean by it.

One: it involves treating others as having worthwhile views. You might say that is obvious, well we all do that. Well look more closely; do we treat everyone else as having the views of equal worth as ours? For example, people of other ages! Do we regard young people as having views of the same worth as those who are a whole lot older? Questions of education, do we regard people who have not had, have not gone through a process of formal education to the same extent as others have as also having views as just as worthwhile as ours.

Questions of race, questions of sex, do we regard people of the other sex as having views that are of worth, equally of worth as ours in any joint decision-making? Husbands in relation to wives for example. Consultation involves the ability to give fair consideration to contrary views, it does not involve, sitting there waiting for this person to stop talking so that you can jump in and explain all the things wrong with what they are saying. It involves a fair-mindedness to contrary views that are different from ours. It involves restraint in expressing one's own opinions: Restraint in phrasing, not to give one's own opinion as though one is revealing holy writ; Restraint in phrasing, restraint in tone, in body language, in volume and length; The willingness to discard one's own idea if necessary, avoidance of dogged defensiveness. Even when the case is lost, to fear giving up

your point of view if it can somehow reflect upon your machismo or image or whatever, but being prepared to accept hey you know, what you are saying makes more sense than what I said. Going along with it. And freedom of expression!

Freedom of expression is another thing which we say, well you know, why are you bothering me with all this when we all believe it; Well practice gives a denial to that. Freedom of expression means that if you are in a collective group and here we'll drag out the poor old Local Spiritual Assembly. And you, in a Local Spiritual Assembly, you bring up this wonderful point of view and your wife is also on the local assembly and she happens to disagree with it. It means that in the car on the way home you don't chew her out and say: "How can I expect anyone to accept what I'm saying when even my own wife won't believe it. Even - what does it mean - that even the person closest and dearest to me is not willing to support me?" That is not freedom of expression. Same with one's children in a consultative group; If the kids can feel that it is safe for them to express disagreement without the fact that there will be a terrible scene back at home tonight because they dared to speak up and contradict their parents: then we have freedom of expression. With parents, with one's own cultural group. To be able to speak up and express a different point of view without someone saying "but I would expect because you and I are from the same city or the same ethnic background or the same origin or have had the same life experiences, surely we can stick together, surely we should agree with each other."

Many of our problems are arising in the Baha'i community from the failure to express freedom of expression in relation to one's cultural or ethnic background; Freedom to disagree with individuals who have a certain station, self-assigned or otherwise, and so on and all these different kinds of things. We need to apply these consultative principles not simple to local spiritual assembly gatherings we need to apply them broadly, we need to apply them to informal discussion with each other, in the most informal of setting. We need to apply them to the relationship between man and woman in marriage in all the decision making of the marriage relationship. All the things that have been written about strengthening Baha'i marriage they can be reduced to this simple point of the principle of Baha'i consultation. We need to apply these principles to family relationships between parents and children and all other members of an extended family. We need to apply them to all kinds of Baha'i meetings, not simply assembly meetings or even the consultative part of the nineteen-day feast.

We need to apply them to the work place in our relationship with friends who are not Baha'is. Because one finds, and we hear example of this in reports that come to the World Center: of people becoming attracted to the Baha'is because of the virtues shown by the Baha'is in the work place. And if you look at it more closely: what you find is that the Baha'i has been practicing certain Baha'i consultative principles in terms of respect for contrary views, valuing the view irrespective of the source from which it comes, be prepared to give up one's own view if necessary and so on. So we have a wonderful tool before us, and we need to use it a lot more widely than we are using it now. We need to be able to show to the world

the Baha'i community as a model of quality and meaningful interpersonal relationships.

This is a need in the present day when society is disintegrating in its inability to sustain meaningful personal relationships. And it is a great opportunity to attract others to the cause.

These are the three areas that I feel are particularly pressing at this time in history:

- To get a deeper perspective on the Baha'i approach of what is happening in the world today to avoid being drawn in to the passions and tensions around us.
- To be able to develop a heightened spiritual awareness in the face of the materialism in which the world is awash.
- And to develop meaningful, harmonious human relationships a time when individuals around us have lost the ability to make meaningful contact and establish harmonious relations with each other.

I believe that if we commit ourselves far more fully to these three elements we will at one and the same time protect ourselves from the harmful forces of the world around us, and we will at the same time fulfill our ardent desire to attract to the cause of Baha'u'llah a growing and increasing number of people so that they will join us in finding salvation and fulfillment under the shadow of the Cause of God.

Thank you.