

2000 Bahá'í Conference on Social & Economic Development
Orlando, Florida

*A New Vision
for the Arts in
Spiritualizing
Society*

by Ludwig Tuman

(Edited by Author 20 Feb 2007)

“A New Vision for the Arts in Spiritualizing Society”
2000 Bahá’í Social & Economic Development Conference, Orlando, Florida
by Ludwig Tuman

Friends, what a delight it is to be here today and to share such a variety of perspectives and cultural backgrounds. You know, something that strikes me as I look at our wonderful diversity is that the one thing that brings us all here together is our common faith in Bahá’u’lláh. His spirit and teachings are the center of unity around which we revolve.

In the time of Bahá’u’lláh, people commonly traveled with a horse and carriage. And what I’m talking about is just like a wheel from one of those carriages. Imagine if you will, that we’re looking at the wheel, with a hub in its center. Coming out from the hub in all directions are the spokes, which connect to the rim. Now the hub in the center is like the spirit of Bahá’u’lláh’s teachings. And the rim is humanity, with all our diversity of culture and perspective. Some of us may be on opposite sides of the wheel, 180 degrees apart in our usual ways of thinking and doing things, but being connected to a common center allows us to see that we belong to a single family, to acknowledge the validity of one another’s ways, and to appreciate our diversity.

Could the wheel go forward without a hub in the center? Of course not. And what if we had the hub of unity but not the round rim of diversity? If we all tried to be the same, the wheel would be square. This is why the beloved Guardian said that the watchword in our Faith is “unity in diversity”. We need both. Either one without the other, and the carriage can’t move.

Now there’s an interesting thing about diversity. If you don’t combine it with unity, it can act as a force that repels people from one another. For us as Bahá’ís, because we *do* revolve around a common spiritual center, it’s relatively easy for us to take delight in diversity. But in the world at large, where most people are not united by a universal spirit, the same diversity that we find delightful is for others a potent source of distrust, irritation, misunderstanding and friction. It can even happen to us. How many of us, for example, have traveled in another land, seen what the people serve for food, and asked ourselves, “Do they actually eat that?”

Among people, diversity can act as a scattering force that pulls *away* from the center. It needs to be combined with a stronger force of unity that pulls *toward* the center. This principle operates on a large scale in our Faith, where the Sacred Word and the Covenant provide the inward pull that holds us all together, that keeps us from flying off the wheel. They are the spokes that connect us to a common center. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said that differences among people can cause them to be estranged from each other, unless there is a transcendent power to harmonize the variety. He wrote, “...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... ..Then difference reinforceth harmony, and diversity strengtheneth love, and multiplicity is the greatest factor for coordination.”¹

It is crucial that we apply this principle of unity in diversity not only on a large scale, on the level of the whole human race, but also on a small scale, in every specialized field of human activity. In every kind of social and economic development – whether educational, material or artistic – we should try to achieve the same balance. On the one hand, we need to respect the variety of perspectives and approaches that make up our cultural diversity. But on the other, we also need to turn to the Bahá’í teachings, in order to identify the core values and principles that apply. Only by turning our sight to our common center in the Divine Teachings can we agree on the fundamentals and be united in our thoughts and efforts.

In the area of art, there is again a great diversity of cultures, traditions and perspectives. These are the rim of the wheel, and we have an opportunity to appreciate some of that diversity here at this Conference. But there are also a number of core concepts found in the Bahá’í Writings, regarding the arts, which provide the spokes that can connect us to a common center. The arts can do much to help in the building of Bahá’u’lláh’s World Order, including the social and economic aspects of that Order. If we are to make progress in our use of art, however, we need to be united in our basic understanding of it. And to reach that unity, we need to know what the spokes are that hold the wheel together. In that spirit, then, I’d like to share with you a few of the core concepts, as I understand them, that are found in the Writings on this subject.

When I say “art” or “the arts,” I mainly have in mind those that are commonly referred to as “fine arts” – such as poetry, painting, sculpture, theatrical drama, film, music, dance, and others. But I also have in mind the “design arts,” such as architecture and urban design – as well as the crafts, such as pottery and rug-weaving, because these arts operate on a spiritual as well as a material plane.

At the mention of all such art forms, we are easily reminded of experiences we’ve had with them in our lives. In fact, when preparing these notes I was impressed by an event in the life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. He witnessed a theatrical work when He was a young boy. It was a mystery play of Ali’s Betrayal and Passion, and by the Master’s own description, it affected Him so deeply that He wept and couldn’t sleep for many nights.² Like the Master, we’ve all been exposed to art works that have moved us to cry or laugh, to marvel or ponder. Memories come to us of poetry and novels we’ve read, the works we’ve seen and heard in moviehouses, on television, in concert halls, theaters, museums, and the open air, the famous buildings and the uplifting parks we’ve walked through. This collective experience with the arts leads us to feel confident that we have a handle on what art is all about, what its nature and potential are. And yet, sometimes I wonder.

I’ve been involved with the arts in one way or another virtually all my life – at various

times as a composer, choral director, educator, or writer about the arts. And you know, the more I meditate on the Bahá'í Writings' inspiring statements on this subject, the more I'm struck by the dramatic contrast between our Teachings and the secular view of art that prevails today in the cultures in which we and our children are immersed.

In our societies, we've been taught – if not by word then certainly by example – that the “fine arts” do not possess an inherent purpose, except to provide aesthetic pleasure and to serve as a channel for self-exploration and self-expression. The general public tends to look upon them as a form of entertainment and a pastime. One indication of this is that in many parts of the United States, the fine arts are regarded as having so little value that they are not even studied as part of the regular curriculum in public schools. Unfortunately, the attitude one often encounters among artists themselves, has not helped matters. Historical forces in the 19th and 20th centuries compelled many artists to take an independent and disengaged stance in their relation to society. As a result, it's become common to hear artists say that their work should not be tied to the interests of society, or to those of a religion, or any organized body.

But what do the Bahá'í Writings indicate about art? They say that arts and sciences generally should “result in advantage to man,” “ensure his progress,” and “elevate his rank”³; that music is a ladder for our souls, “a means whereby they may be lifted up into the realm on high”⁴; that the art of drama will become “a great educational power”⁵; that when a painter takes up her paint brush, it is as if she were “at prayer in the Temple”⁶; that the arts fulfill “their highest purpose when showing forth the praise of God”⁷; and that “music, art and literature...are to represent and inspire the noblest sentiments and highest aspirations.”⁸ The beloved Guardian saw such spiritual power in the arts that he predicted they would eventually do much to help the Cause spread the spirit of love and unity.

When one considers the wondrous vision of art that shimmers in the Bahá'í Writings, one can't help but feel that it would be in the Faith's interest for us to make a greater effort to appreciate the spirituality of art's essence, and to better grasp the magnitude of the service it can render. In fact, friends, I would submit to you that in our artistic efforts to date -- including even such majestic works as the Temple of India and the Arc on Mount Carmel -- we have barely begun to scratch the surface of the potential that art holds for the spiritual upliftment and ennoblement of humanity. The Bahá'í Writings hold before our gaze the radiant outlines of an art well grounded in spiritual reality, an art of pure and noble intent, of depth and splendor, diffusing the fragrance of divine teachings and touching the hearts and conscience of the masses. Would it not behoove us, then, to do whatever we can to promote its development in all our national and local communities? As a first step toward the emergence of such an art, perhaps the most important thing we can do is to reach a clear consensus about its fundamental nature and purpose.

According to Bahá'u'lláh, all things in creation, from the humblest atom to the greatest

spiritual law, have a specific role and an assigned purpose to fulfill. “Each and every created thing,” He wrote, “hath, according to a fixed decree, been endowed with the capacity to exercise a particular influence, and been made to possess a distinct virtue.”¹⁰ He gave a weighty example of this principle when He wrote that justice, which would seem to be an end in its own right, is actually a means to an even higher end: “The purpose of justice,” He wrote, “is the appearance of unity among men.”¹¹

The principle of serving a higher end applies also to art. To appreciate the role envisioned for art in the Bahá’í teachings, we need first to consider its basic nature. Art finds its true home in the world of spirit. Through the use of metaphors, it engages both our feelings and our reason. Whatever secondary effects it may have, its primary effect is on the soul itself. Art has the capacity to convey to us a sacred and deeply moving vision of life, to reorient and sanctify our perceptions, to strengthen spiritual values, to reorder our priorities, to elevate our attitudes, to spiritualize our sentiments, and to galvanize our will to live in accordance with the divine counsels. In doing so, art assists us to attain the very purpose of our existence: to know and to worship our Creator. This can be summed up by saying that art, in its highest role, promotes spiritual growth by helping to ennoble the individual soul and the collective life of humanity. It serves to reinforce, in its humble way, the creative influence of the Word of God.

With every work we produce, then, we artists have an effect, for better or for worse, on the spiritual condition of society. Our work has this influence on people whether we are aware of it or not, whether we want it to or not. And this fact lays upon us a serious and unavoidable responsibility. Perhaps it can be described by saying that we are responsible, first, for making a special effort to continually enrich our understanding of the Sacred Writings; second, for viewing our vocation as a form of spiritual service to humankind; and third, for taking care that the outlook, beliefs, values, attitudes and emotions that we intend to manifest in our art and to reinforce in the public, vibrate in harmony with the divine teachings.

If this description of the essential nature and highest role of art is reasonably on the mark, then it has great implications for the ways that art can contribute to social and economic development. Ever since the Bahá’í community began to involve itself worldwide in this area of endeavor, we have been reminded repeatedly that society’s material development will be solid and lasting only if it is built on the foundation of a spiritual understanding of life. The Universal House of Justice put it succinctly when it stated: “..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.”¹² We’ve seen that the highest aspiration of art is precisely to help uplift humanity’s spiritual condition. *This means that the practice of art, along with models of learning such as the Ruhi Institute, should be regarded as one of those essential activities that can help to spiritualize both the Bahá’í community and society as a whole. Art, then, clearly belongs among the primary activities that help lay the very foundation for Bahá’í social and economic development.*

In addition to working separately at the level of the community's spiritual foundation, art can also be integrated directly into virtually any development project. The practical considerations of integrating art into development programs were admirably addressed in a presentation given by Donald Rogers in last year's Development Conference, titled "The Use of the Arts in the Bahá'í Community." If you haven't already read it, I would encourage you to. So far I've been talking mainly on the level of theory. Would you like to have an example showing how art can lend its support to a specific kind of grassroots social development project? Alright, let's take the public devotions program. In 1999 the Universal House of Justice called on the Bahá'í world to further develop our local communities and reach out to the general public by instituting "regular meetings for worship open to all."¹³ The Bahá'ís of Oxnard, California, along with the neighboring community of Ventura, have for the last few months been co-hosting a regular public worship program, held in a community center. Their Assemblies jointly decided to enhance the public appeal of these programs by calling on local talents to integrate the arts into the worship services, especially with the use of live musicians. This has stirred enthusiasm in the community and has attracted a number of seekers.

Another consideration is that the House of Justice, in its Ridván letter of this year, has emphasized the importance of attending to the spiritual needs of children and involving them more in the life of the community. It's clear that our long-range success in developing the arts, and in channeling their spiritual influence, will depend to a great extent on the work we do with children. So I'd like to end by sharing with you briefly an art work that serves as an example of both -- it's a song performed by a child, a budding musician named Jasmine Olinga Howard; and at the same time, it's an example of one of the many ways the arts can lend their support to enrich and enliven a public devotional program.

As an educator who's worked with children as well as adults, I've always been impressed with children's ability to grasp spiritual principles and make them their own. Since Jasmine studies composition and piano with me, I gave her selected quotes from the *Compilation on the Arts* to learn as part of her musical education. Before playing for you the recording of this song, then, I'd like to let you hear Jasmine express, in a few words, her understanding of what the arts are about.¹⁴ The song we'll hear her sing afterward is about 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and is called "Softly His Voice is Calling". Its words were written nearly a century ago in 1908, by Louise Waite, an American believer and writer of hymns, to whom 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave the name, Shahnaz Khánum.¹⁵

I gave Jasmine these words of Louise Waite and asked her to set them to a melody of her own making. She was six years old at the time (now 7). She wrote the melody, I then added the rest, and together we came up with the song. As we listen to it, I'd like to suggest that we all imagine how the general public attending the open devotional meetings in our own local communities will feel, when they see and hear our expressions of faith rendered through art works, and performed by children as well as adults.

References

- 1 *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdul-Bahá*, p. 291
- 2 *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, p. 93.
- 3 *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 168.
- 4 *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, paragraph 51.
- 5 *'Abdu'l-Bahá in London*, p. 93.
- 6 Tuman, *Mirror of the Divine: Art in the Bahá'í World Community*, p. 45
- 7 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in Blomfield, *The Chosen Highway*, p. 167. Also *Mirror of the Divine (M.O.D.)*, p. 45
- 8 *Bahá'í World*, Vol. XVIII, p. 358.
- 9 Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, XCIII, p. 189.
- 10 Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 67.
- 11 Hornby, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 333. Also *M.O.D.*, p. 228
- 12 To the Bahá'ís of the World, December 28, 1999
- 13 Address of Jasmine Olinga Howard:

Alláh-u-abhá! My name is Jasmine. In my lessons we've been reading what the Bahá'í Writings say about the arts, and this is what I understand. The arts are very important. They are for making people happy, and to relax and to enjoy. It's like a ladder for your soul to go up to the realm on high. The arts can help us to know about spiritual things. They can show us how Bahá'u'lláh's teachings work. And they can show us virtues, like kindness, love, obedience, truthfulness, justice, service, and friendliness. They can even help to make our souls become alive and on fire with the love of God. So, when we want to show the Bahá'í spirit and teachings to people who don't know about it, one of the best ways is to do it with music, and stories, and other arts, because that's how the Faith will spread like wildfire. And when that happens, the whole world will get better, and people will stop fighting, and they will have love in their hearts and help each other.

- 14 The words of Louise Waite (Shahnaz Khanum) are as follows:

Softly His Voice is Calling

Softly His voice is calling now
 calling to you and me.
 Hark to those tones so sweet and low
 over the distant sea.
 Children of mine abide in love
 ever He seems to say.
 'Abdu'l-Bahá we turn to Thee
 Thou art the perfect way.

Softly His voice is calling now

calling to ev'ry heart.
Come little children unto Me
and from Me ne'er depart.
Oh be ye tender, kind and true
ever He seems to say.
'Abdu'l-Bahá we turn to Thee
Thou art the perfect way.