

# *Living the Bahá'í Life: From Guidance To Deed*

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*For verily I say, this is the Day spoken of by God in His book: "On that day will We set a seal upon their mouths; yet shall their hands speak unto Us, and their feet shall bear witness to that which they shall have done."<sup>1</sup>*

From the advent of the Bahá'í Revelation we have been taught that action and responsibility are essential to the life of the individual. The manner in which we live our lives, even from moment to moment, is fundamental to who we are, what we become, and how we transmit God's love to the world. In a time of accelerating social disruption and transformative change, this instruction strikes home decisively. It is not what we believe, what we say we want, or what we promise to do that has any significance in the order of things. Rather, consequence emerges from what we do.

The call to a life of action is key to the living of a Bahá'í life and is central to the requirements of the times. The deeds with which we distinguish ourselves in life are the true measure of our being. This is well-known to every deepened Bahá'í. It behooves us each day to consciously attend to our responsibilities, and to the source of guidance, as we seek to deepen our understanding of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

*Say, O brethren! Let deeds, not words, be your adorning.<sup>2</sup>*

*The essence of faith is fewness of words and abundance of deeds; he whose words exceed his deeds, know verily his death is better than his life.<sup>3</sup>*

Bahá'ís are well aware that an emphasis on action pervades the holy text. But, how do we know what kind of action? A primary activity of the devoted Bahá'í is teaching the Faith. But, what are we teaching? What are we inviting the world to investigate? Is the Bahá'í community a radiant example of the Faith in action, an expression of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh?

Clearly a great deal of work lies ahead. If we are to teach, let us think about what it is we are to teach and how we might teach it. Let's start by thinking about what it means to be a Bahá'í, what a Bahá'í is and what a Bahá'í does. `Abdu'l-Bahá speaks to us of this quite forcefully.

*Let your actions cry aloud to the world that you are indeed Bahá'ís, for it is actions that speak to the world and are the cause of the progress of humanity.*

*If we are true Bahá'ís speech is not needed. Our actions will help on the world, will spread civilization, will help the progress of science, and cause the arts to develop.... It is not through lip-service only that the elect of God have attained to holiness, but by patient lives of active service they have brought light into the world.*

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<sup>1</sup> The Báb, 'Address To the Letters of the Living', The Dawn-Breakers, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh, Part II From the Persian, No. 5.

<sup>3</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, 'Words of Wisdom', Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p.156.

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*Therefore strive that your actions day by day may be beautiful prayers. Turn towards God, and seek always to do that which is right and noble. Enrich the poor, raise the fallen, comfort the sorrowful, bring healing to the sick, reassure the fearful, rescue the oppressed, bring hope to the hopeless, shelter the destitute!*

*This is the work of a true Bahá'í, and this is what is expected of him. If we strive to do all this, then are we true Bahá'ís, but if we neglect it, we are not followers of the Light and we have no right to the name.<sup>4</sup>*

By what means do we “speak to the world”? How are we to contribute to “the progress of humanity”? What are we to teach? Let’s listen for the call:

*It is incumbent upon every man of insight and understanding to strive to translate that which has been written into reality and action.... That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the entire human race.<sup>5</sup>*

*Love manifests its reality in deeds, not only in words – these alone are without effect. In order that love may manifest its power there must be an object, an instrument, a motive.<sup>6</sup>*

We find ourselves challenged to think carefully about what we are doing. Love has long been the effective motive expressed through the lives of religious persons. The act of love is, for the Bahá'í as well as Christian and Muslim, the ultimate manifestation of focused being. But, is not love made true in the doing? To feel love is not to love. “To love” is a verb; it is something we do. We are responsible for bringing about love, for creating the conditions in which it will thrive. It is not something to wait for. `Abdu'l-Bahá's instruction is for us to:

*Act in accordance with the counsels of the Lord: that is, rise up in such wise, and with such qualities, as to endow the body of this world with a living soul, and to bring this young child, humanity, to the stage of adulthood. So far as ye are able, ignite a candle of love in every meeting, and with tenderness rejoice and cheer ye every heart.<sup>7</sup>*

In the new Dispensation we learn to live more fully in context. Bahá'u'lláh opens up the totality of creation to us as a whole system – balanced, potent, accessible. We are shown our place in the dynamic unity of the world, with all its inherent responsibilities, dangers, and possibilities made visible. As we learn to participate more fully, we begin to recognize the critical role we are to serve in the balanced order of things. Personal existence takes on new meaning. We find our very own lives to be integral to the unfolding of history. Responsibility, as it turns out, is not a choice but an unavoidable requirement implicit in the integrity of the cosmos.

This is a deeply personal discovery and has a radical impact on our perceptions of both ourselves and our context. Not only is the way we lead our lives of utmost importance, but so also is our role in the progressive processes of the planet. Circumstances require that we exert a social influence in the world around us. Bahá'u'lláh tells us that guidance itself is to be given to the world in the form of deeds. We are to serve as the instruments through which God transforms the world.

*O SON OF MY HANDMAID!*

*Guidance hath ever been given by words, and now it is given by deeds. Every one must show forth deeds that are pure and holy, for words are the property of all*

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<sup>4</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, pp. 80-81 (emphasis in original).

<sup>5</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, The Proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh, pp. 115-116.

<sup>6</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections From the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, No. 16, p. 34.

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*alike, whereas such deeds as these belong only to Our loved ones. Strive then with heart and soul to distinguish yourselves by your deeds. In this wise We counsel you in this holy and resplendent tablet.*<sup>8</sup>

When we are called upon to distinguish ourselves by our deeds, it is easy to think of this simply as a call to moral rectitude. When we read the words of Bahá'u'lláh we are, indeed, reminded repeatedly of the crucial importance of righteousness as a foundation to the maintenance of balance in both the life of the individual and of society. But, He goes beyond this, instructing that divine guidance is itself to be manifested in our deeds.

*O people of God! Do not busy yourselves in your own concerns; let your thoughts be fixed upon that which will rehabilitate the fortunes of mankind and sanctify the hearts and souls of men. This can best be achieved through pure and holy deeds, through a virtuous life and a goodly behavior. Valiant acts will ensure the triumph of this Cause, and a saintly character will reinforce its power.*<sup>9</sup>

What do we suppose Bahá'u'lláh means here, when He speaks of “valiant acts,” the power of which will be reinforced by “a saintly character?” The Bahá'í Faith is, of course, distinguished by far more than “pure and holy deeds.” Every religious Dispensation has been characterized by moral rectitude and crowned with distinction by the righteousness of its believers and the devotion of its saints. The selflessness attained by believers in any dispensation is a determining factor in the effectiveness of that Dispensation. It is the quality of soul that provides the Holy Spirit with intimate access first to the soul itself and then, through the soul, to the social reality of civilization.

So, what makes Bahá'ís different? To what sort of deeds does Bahá'u'lláh call us? We submit that it is the focus and intent of the Bahá'í Revelation that is new and applicable to the present era. It is distinguished by the purpose of Bahá'u'lláh in addressing the condition and circumstances of humankind as we approach our present tests. This is a profound purpose that addresses every aspect of human life. But, on the field of action it reveals and expresses itself in social terms. Today in the Bahá'í Community we call the process “social and economic development.”

Bahá'ís are responsible, we are taught, for contributing intelligently to the development needs of our communities and to those of the wider (non-Bahá'í) community around us. Key to this responsibility is the necessity for building capacity among individuals, within institutions, and of communities as a whole. We are to investigate and explore the nature of the transformed society enshrined in the Bahá'í Revelation. We are called upon to open the door to the full expression of the Faith in the world around us. Yet, `Abdu'l-Bahá asks us:

*Why then are ye quenched, why silent, why leaden and dull? Ye must shine forth like the lightning....*<sup>10</sup>

We have been given the principles necessary for the advancement of civilization. We have been armed with a new way of understanding the world and its progress through history. We know something of the pattern with which the new order must be vested. The rest can only be left to us. It is ours to initiate, to love, to serve.

*The perfect love needs an unselfish instrument, absolutely freed from fetters of every kind.*<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, The Hidden Words of Bahá'u'lláh, Part II From the Persian, No. 76.

<sup>9</sup> Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings From the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, XLIII, pp. 93-94.

<sup>10</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, Selections From the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá, No. 210, p. 266.

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Only Bahá'u'lláh can transform the world. If we are to be the “unselfish instruments” of a Dispensation, we must give ourselves over to a new mind.

*On the outspread tablet of this world, ye are the verses of His singleness; and atop lofty palace towers, ye are the banners of the Lord.... Ye are the birds that soar upward into the firmament of knowledge, the royals falcons on the wrist of God.*

*Why then are ye quenched, why silent, why leaden and dull? Ye must shine forth like the lightning, and raise up a clamouring like unto the great sea....*

*In the darkness of the world be ye radiant flames; in the sands of perdition, be ye wellsprings of the water of life, be ye guidance from the Lord God. Now is the time to serve, now is the time to be on fire. Know ye the value of this chance, this favourable juncture that is limitless grace, ere it slip from your hands.*

*Soon will our handful of days, our vanishing life, be gone, and we shall pass empty-handed, into the hollow that is dug for those who speak no more; wherefore must we bind our hearts to the manifest Beauty, and cling to the lifeline that faileth never. We must gird ourselves for service, kindle love's flame, and burn away in its heat....*

*Well is it with the doers of great deeds.<sup>12</sup>*

**The Blue Ridge Initiative** serves as the training and resource group for Mottahedeh Development Services (MDS) in Virginia, the Carolinas, and nearby areas. MDS is a social and economic development agency of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States. The Blue Ridge Initiative supports capacity-building for individuals and institutions through social and economic development processes and encourages the full engagement of the Bahá'í Community in the wider world. This mission is pursued through a variety of training programs and support services, including: 1) Training and consultative services for local Bahá'í assemblies, communities, and existing development projects; 2) weekend retreats introducing Bahá'ís to the fundamental concepts of Bahá'í social and economic development and the major models for social transformation current in the Bahá'í world; and 3) training opportunities in organization-building and skills development.

Working together with a network of trainers, including resource groups like The Blue Ridge Initiative, MDS coordinates its work with the Regional Bahá'í Councils and the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States. During the past year Blue Ridge organized a working group to develop a comprehensive workshop curricula for skills building within the Bahá'í Community, and this group is joining with others to develop a national training plan for such capacity building across the United States.

The Blue Ridge Initiative was formed in May 1999 by two couples, Oscar and Winnie Merritt of Mt. Airy, North Carolina, and Laureen Pierre and David Perry of Carrboro, North Carolina. Eight Bahá'ís serve on the board. Six others have joined the effort as trainers, facilitators, and consultants. Together these individuals bring a range of experience in the United States, Asia, Africa, South and Central America, and the Caribbean as development practitioners, trainers, planners, project managers, and involvement in both Bahá'í-inspired and formal Bahá'í SED projects.

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<sup>11</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 36.

<sup>12</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections From the Writings of `Abdu'l-Bahá*, No. 210, pp. 266-267.