

DO I HAVE PERMISSION?

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The theme of this talk is to explore an essential value in Bahá'í culture, the role of the individual. I wish to draw to your attention the centrality of individual initiative in the development of Bahá'í culture. We are going to review some literature and history in the development of culture to explore the contrast with Bahá'í concepts. I intend to draw contrast to existing cultural values, which may be inconsistent with Bahá'í values.

The title of the talk is used to frame the reference to the role of the individual. The starting point for change is the role of the individual. In some high context cultures the individual's role is subsumed into the larger cultural context. That is to say the individual tends to act in concert with the dominant cultural predisposition. Normative expectations define what is expected and how one is to act and react. These expectations are frequently unstated, but nonetheless they are clear to the members of the community.

HIGH CONTEXT CULTURES

Take, for example, the way two Japanese persons might greet each other. The very polite formality is laden with numerous messages about status, the appropriate distance between people, the permissible topics of discussion, the indirectness of the communication, concepts of time, permissible levels of intimacy, and the avoidance of offensive language and forward behavior. Expressions of individuality are generally frowned upon.

In high context cultures most of the commercial enterprises are familial. In fact there are real concerns about the circle of trust in these societies. Francis Fukuyama's book on trust, notes that distrust represents a challenge to the growth of economic entities in places such as China. Because the levels of distrust are so extensive, the head of the family prefers to have the children or relatives manage the enterprise rather than bring in professional managers, who in fact may be more capable.

In these cultural groupings the scope of individual initiative is quite limited. It is the family business, the family concern; the societal concerns that condition reactions and responses. In these societies there is much more harmony and balance. The individual cedes his or her own preferences to the greater community identity.

In low context cultures (hello, that's where we are) the individual identifies more with other individuals rather than a larger group. Concerns tend to focus on the individual. This reference refers to western society most clearly. The refrain "DO YOUR OWN THING" best reflects this concern. Bumper stickers are a good reflection of the values in this cultural context; QUESTION AUTHORITY; DON'T TREAD ON ME.

All of these serve to pose the duality of the task that we face, because in this dispensation Bahá'u'lláh came to create a bridge between the East and the West. His mission is to initiate the process of building a new civilization. In this civilization there will emerge a new code of values, new expressions of virtues we seek to develop individually, institutionally and communally, where the concept of trust will underscore all activity. This Revelation begins the dawning of a new era in human development.

We stand at the threshold of attempting to build for the first time in history a new culture, which is neither of the East or the West. Our aim is to establish a new civilization. This civilization's goals are to bring about the unity of all peoples. **IMAGINE OUR TRUE PURPOSE.** The ultimate aim of all Bahá'í activity is to accomplish this central purpose, namely, the establishment of the oneness of humankind.

Bahá'u'lláh's statement that all people are created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization, implies that every person has both the right and responsibility to contribute to this historic and far-reaching, collective enterprise, whose goal is nothing less than the peace, the prosperity and unity of the entire human family.

Even with this grand vision and clarion call for service to humankind, we find that sometimes we might not feel up to it. Thus, do I have permission to teach? Do I have permission to advance the cause? Do I have permission to take initiative? Am I in condition to execute all these mandates?

While we know that we have both the right and the responsibility, is it evident that we have fully embraced the full scope and mission of Bahá'u'lláh?

What does the establishment of the oneness of humankind look like? Have you reflected on this topic? Would you know oneness if you saw it? What would it feel like? Whose feelings would matter?

Do you have permission to create oneness? What tools do you need to have to create oneness? Where will you find them? Do children have a role? Do the children have permission to create oneness? Who gives them permission? What are the steps one has to follow to obtain permission? Is there a culture of encouragement in place that supports initiative?

Why all these questions? The answers seem to be obvious from our Writings, of course. I am not speaking to the texts, I am addressing our behavior, our beliefs and our actions. Do we give ourselves permission to think and act on a scale appropriate to the dimension of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh? That is the question I seek to present to you today.

In order to dramatize this point, I wish to relate to you how this question of permission affected the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and our own thinking about the possibilities of growth in this community. Before I narrate this process of growth that the National Spiritual Assembly experienced, I want to call attention to several points that impacted our ability to give ourselves permission.

In modern culture we have developed the art of deficit analysis to a fine state. What is deficit analysis? It is a thinking pattern that compels you to look for the weakness, the inadequacies, the deficiencies in reasoning, behavior, function, etc. that results in the inability of one or the

community to act. It's a paralyzing way of addressing reality. All of us have been taught to think that way. If you grew up in this culture, you were taught that is a fundamental way to learn how to address and encounter reality. It's a part of your subconscious. Looking at reality through this kaleidoscope tends to reinforce the negative. Of course, the very scientific method reflects this form of analysis.

Using deficit analysis, our community, in our opinion, had diminished our capacity to see the remarkable qualities existent in the Bahá'í community. For example, we had embraced the notion that we are not growing as a religious community. Much of the dialogue at National Bahá'í Conventions focused on the lamentable state of our growth, a legitimate topic for consultation.

When the National Teaching Committee first came to the chamber of the National Spiritual Assembly with comparative statistics about religious growth in America, we were incredulous. It was too difficult to believe. The statistics demonstrated that the Bahá'í Faith had been the fastest growing religion in the United States for past thirty years, and yet we didn't believe it. Our rate of growth over the last thirty years to the year 2000 was 1400%. The closest next religion barely made 120%. And yet we had convinced ourselves we were not growing. And our manner and approach of thinking had focused always and consistently on our deficits. Do you know that in 1970 we had barely 10-15,000 Bahá'ís in the United States, and today we have over 147,000. In addition, lamentably, we have lost nearly 150,000. So, in the same period of time of growth, of unbelievable and unparalleled growth, we lost nearly 50% of those who originally embraced the Cause. So we have been growing in recent years at a 5% rate of growth, compared to all other major religions that have been growing at a rate of 2 and a half percent.

The National Spiritual Assembly agreed that our Bahá'í community could participate in what is called the FACT Survey, the largest multi-denominational survey of religious communities in America. And some 746 local spiritual assemblies participated on behalf of the Bahá'í community. The survey concluded, among its various conclusions, that Jewish, Bahá'í and Mormon communities are putting a new face on American religion. Again we were incredulous, because we were focusing not on a grand vision, but what was occurring moment to moment, and not understanding the great vision that stood before us. We had so focused on the deficit analysis that we could not find the joy in the accomplishments of the community.

The National Teaching Committee also discovered something else that surprised us. The last time the Bahá'í community grew at a very fast pace (1960-70), so to did most other religion communities. The point being that spiritual receptivity was at its zenith in the late 1960's and early 1970's, and at that moment in time, all religious communities found welcome new adherents. However, our community's investment in deficit analysis demonstrated that the Bahá'ís were not teaching during the 1980's because we had not witnessed the same staggering rate of growth that we experienced in the 1960-70's. That was a common refrain at our national conventions in the 1980's, "Bahá'ís aren't teaching!" No religious communities grew in the 1980's any more than 2 and a half percent.

We wondered if that was true. So we asked, "Is there a way to find out about this?" Once again we discovered that there was a way to measure whether or not the Bahá'ís were teaching. In late 1979 the National Spiritual Assembly had commissioned a study to measure the level of public recognition of the Faith in United States. The results of that study demonstrated that a mere 2% of the population of the United States could identify the Bahá'í Faith. In 2000, we again did a public

opinion survey to determine what percentage of the population recognized the Bahá'í Faith. Twenty years later, the 2% figure had become 27% of the population could identify the Faith, and of this number, 5 million people could state one true fact about the Bahá'í Faith. Some 41 million had heard of the Faith through various forms of media. Eleven million heard about the Faith from individuals. To achieve that level of personal outreach, every registered Bahá'í would have to have spoken to at least 150 people and told them about the Faith. This was proof positive that the Bahá'ís had been actively teaching over this period and perhaps part of the challenge was the receptivity of the population and not the deficiencies of the Bahá'í community.

Once again the National Spiritual Assembly had to give itself permission to consider other ways of looking at reality.

The National Teaching Committee then began to do extensive research into religious conversion literature and the identification of patterns of current receptivity in the population. One of the key findings is that 52 million people are actively engaged in seeking a new religion. **52 million people!** And the religion they are looking for is one that is inclusive of all populations, respects the equality of women and men, seeks to eliminate prejudice, has a strong sense of social justice and is actively pursuing an agenda of social justice, and has developed a sense of community that is cohesive and unifying.

DOES ANY OF THIS INFORMATION SOUND FAMILIAR?

With this information and insight in hand, the National Spiritual Assembly had to give itself permission to think on a scale heretofore unprecedented in the history of the Bahá'í Faith. We had to consider how we would reach this population of 52 million people, who were actively seeking, before conditions might change and the opportunity would be lost for another generation. Once again led by the forward-looking National Teaching Committee, a new way of reaching enormously large populations was developed. It is called the media campaign.

This campaign was born of a grand vision. We gave ourselves permission to have a grand vision. We began a process where no Bahá'í institution had gone before: develop a mass campaign to reach millions of people with the message of Bahá'u'lláh.

After several years of developing materials for video production about the Faith, we came to learn that we knew virtually nothing about how to communicate with the public. Our language is full of jargon and code words that only we understand. We began to use focus groups of non-Bahá'ís to test their understandings and their receptivity to the Bahá'í message.

In just a few short years we were able to generate 250,000 responses to the Media Campaign, a remarkable achievement. However, our community had not yet given itself permission to accept this information and to embrace this vision. Thus, in far too many instances, the telephone calls were not followed up. You heard some of the telephone calls from individuals who, standing in phone booths in malls, were pleading for us to call them back that very moment as the Bahá'í message had struck a chord in their lives. And yet our community had not yet given itself permission to respond.

The Universal House of Justice indicated several years ago that this country had the greatest potential for large-scale growth in the world. This affirmation from the Supreme Institution

emboldened us to believe we had chosen the right path. In April 2002, the Universal House of Justice wrote the National Spiritual Assembly and said the following:

“We have no doubt that the members of your community, in their desire to ensure the unhindered progress of the Cause of God, will take to heart and translate into effective deeds the insights and guidelines you have set forth as requisites to their success in the Five Year Plan. The lines of action you have so clearly delineated for advancing the process of entry by troops make for a welcome integration of effort at all levels of the community. The teaching work, largely stimulated by the increasingly effective media campaign, driven by individual and collective activity, and fortified by the Institute process, its study circles, as well as devotional gatherings, children’s classes and youth Programs that are multiplying - all these constitute key elements which, operating within the framework of clusters, can and will guarantee a systematic pattern of growth.”

With this kind of guarantee the National Spiritual Assembly, again gave itself permission to reflect on the real state of our community. This reflection will be released tomorrow morning and will be posted on the National Spiritual Assembly’s web page. In this document the National Spiritual Assembly assesses the advancements made under the Five Year Plan. I encourage you to read and reflect on it. It is not a document that will be read in two minutes – it’s 26 pages. It’s a thorough review of all the things going on in our community, and it reflects our deepest understanding of the remarkable qualities of this community.

In this document we express our confidence in the community. We note the unprecedented positive response to the Destiny of America Statement, where 270 newspapers, with an audience of 23 million readers, printed the document. We see the development of institutes, hundreds of study circles, devotional meetings, and over 500 children’s classes as evidence of our strength.

We see clearly that community is the sine qua non of our growth. A thriving social and spiritual community life promotes retention of current members and attracts new members. We have discovered, by looking at literature again, that conflict and particularly conflict over teaching and training methods, is the primary impediment to growth in all-religious communities.

Again according to the FACT Survey, the three key ingredients for growth of religious communities are the bonding of the members into the group, training and education in religious principles, and a sense of purpose and vision.

DO YOU HAVE PERMISSION TO HAVE A VISION? WHAT ABOUT THE YOUTH? DO YOU HAVE PERMISSION TO HAVE A VISION?

Has your Local Spiritual Assembly met with you as the Five Year Plan states? The Five Year Plan states that Local Spiritual Assemblies are to consult regularly with the children and the youth, because it says very clearly in the Plan that they are to be given space for initiative.

What population group is the largest group of seekers? Nearly 45% of the people who phoned in asking for information about the Bahá’í Faith are under 25 years of age. There are currently more children in school than any time in the history of the country. In 1970 the average age of the Bahá’í community in the United States was 25, and in 2002 it is nearly 45. All great religious movements are led by youth. These young people are not following in the footsteps of their parents. They are

interested in spiritual values, less interested in drugs, increasingly less interested in premarital sex, believe in marriage, and a more traditional lifestyle.

We will not grow until the youth are at the vanguard of the teaching of our Faith. Have you given them permission to be at the forefront? What have you done, members of assemblies and parents, to ensure that the youth and the junior youth and the children have permission to take initiative?

Recently, we learned of a community in the Atlanta area where two nine-year children (that's third grade) asked the Local Spiritual Assembly for permission to organize the Feast. In and of itself this effort is not unique to our community. What is unique is these children wanted to honor and pay tribute to the sacrifice of Bahá'u'lláh's imprisonment in the Síyáh-Chál. The children went to their school and obtained permission from the Principal to host the Feast in the school gymnasium. Whereupon these children, with other colleagues of the same age, undertook to decorate the gymnasium, you know what a gymnasium looks like, as though it were the prison where the Blessed Beauty was held. They recreated the scene in the Síyáh-Chál from reading in Nabíl's narrative. They did the best they could, they brought dirt, they brought vermin, vermin in this case were gerbils – pretty good for 9 year old kids, I thought. And they read from the writings of Nabíl about that time of great moment in the beginning of the history of our Faith. The adults felt they had never been closer to Bahá'u'lláh, because they saw the purity of motive of the children taking this initiative. And they said, if that is what the next generation looks like, they need more space to have more initiative. Don't you need to give your children more space for taking more initiative? Don't underestimate their capacity.

Did this community create a culture of encouragement for the children to assume the mantle of leadership? The House of Justice has called upon us to create a "culture of encouragement". Has your community offered to assist you in the process of assuming leadership as the PLAN states? Has your community embraced a culture of encouragement? Are we developing a culture that supports youth initiatives?

The culture of encouragement is the antidote to the culture of deficit analysis. With a culture of encouragement, we focus on those positive aspects of individual initiative and collective efforts. A culture of encouragement is the invisible and visible expression of love and support for those who arise to serve.

In a culture of encouragement we will create the foundation of a new civilization that recognizes all persons have the capacity to serve. With the rejection by the kings and rulers of Bahá'u'lláh's message, the advancement of this Cause devolves to all of us.

Do you have permission? Have you given yourself permission? When will we not have to ask for permission to adopt the grand vision of Bahá'u'lláh? The time is now. Leave this conference on social and economic development with a commitment to fully embrace Bahá'u'lláh's vision for today and actively engage in the establishment of the oneness of humankind. Let this be your life's purpose. Give yourself permission.

Thank you very much.