Primer for Baha'i Assemblies

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An often-quoted individual has often remarked that a book is a letter written to unknown friends. The word which I like in that sentence is unknown. For some reason your friends—those who meet and speak with you—can't read you. You keep rising up before them, obstructing what you are trying to say.

The ideal reader is a person who doesn't know you, and who has chosen to spend an hour or so with your words instead of another person's, because yours happen to suit him at the time.

Now about this article, I suppose a number of my friends will read it—my friends and their friends. Most of these readers will be Bahá'ís, or close to it. If you don't happen to be a Bahá'í, you may not see any reason for looking at it.

But perhaps you have children and want to develop ways of thinking with them. Or perhaps you belong to a club, or serve on a committee, or, one way or another, have to consult about this and that with other people. If so, the techniques of consultation which Bahá'ís are developing may be of some use to you. Of course, you will find good material on group thinking at your library. But I believe we have a plus factor to contribute, because what we are doing is different: we have a "something not ourselves" to which we all refer—a common focal center. That is why we, who are all kinds of previously unrelated, or even hostile, people—can get together, and think and act together.

The matriarch, the man on the pillar, the Victorian father, the dictator—are all water over the dam these days. The new way of living is being together and sharing life together, adding our light to other people's light, accumulating phases of truth. We are all partners now. The job we are doing is building a world. The method we are using involves "loving consultation".

Perhaps it is sentimental, but I hope somewhere there will be an unknown friend or so who will feel like reading this.

Some years ago in Persia I startled fellow committee-members who had mistakenly appointed me their chairman, by coming to work with a bell. It was a small metal bell. You punched it and it clanged. I explained to my fellows—who were mostly dignified, older men—that whenever the bell clanged, some one else was to have the floor. I said that in my opinion a committee chairman's main function was to regulate conversational traffic, and to make absolutely certain that every member had expressed himself freely. Persia's history goes back several thousand years, during which years, I believe, no one had ever stopped the flow of anyone's conversation by punching a bell. I can only hope that the then members of the East-West Committee have long since forgiven and forgotten the whole thing.

I still believe that a chairman's first duty is to extract everyone's opinion. If he does this conscientiously, no one person will hold the floor too long, especially on the Assembly, where nine are involved. In cases where one or two members do all the talking, the chairman's technique is still deficient. Members of new, untried Assemblies can discipline one another and the chair by insisting that everyone be heard, for unless all nine have expressed themselves, the consultation cannot be said to represent spiritual guidance.

The chairman's first job is to bring out what is in the minds of his eight fellow-members, and he needs a good sense of timing and pacing to get through an evening's work. It seems wise for him to express his own views last of all. Certainly he should never take advantage of his position to give himself the floor. One of the best chairmen I know always asks permission before stating his view. Other functions of the chairman are to serve as the Assembly's spokesman and representative to the outside world; he presides at Feasts; he addresses visitors to the Assembly; he, in some states, must be present at Bahá'í marriage ceremonies, and so on. As somebody has said, he is the Assembly's facade.

The corresponding secretary, however, has the hardest task. In a large community his phone rings at all hours. Everyone applies to him for everything, blames him for everything. In voting for a secretary one may ask oneself such questions as: Has he tact? Can he write a letter? Has he an orderly mind? The chairman is Sunday-best, but the secretary is all-day-long; and if not always an archangel, the secretary is invariably a martyr.

As for the recording secretary, he is also a vital factor in Assembly life, because any legal or other subsequent action that may eventuate will center around the minutes he has made. It is a mistake to fall asleep when the minutes are being read; they hold your history—you must see to it that they include an accurate account of whatever your Assembly is doing.

We come to the treasurer. Perhaps of all the Assembly members, he must be the one who shows the most love to the community. This is not an attempt at humor. We are still infantile spiritually speaking, in our attitute toward the fund, because we were bred in a materialistic world where money seems hard to get and once got must be held on to. The Bahá'í teaching on contributions to the fund is that we should open our hands, relax, let go. "We must be like the fountain or spring that is continually emptying itself of all that it has and is continually being refilled from an invisible source." Infants need love. The best treasurer I know expresses gratitude even for the smallest contributions. During consultation periods he does not evaluate a man's opinion on the basis of the man's gifts to the fund. He does not harangue the friends at the Nineteen Day Feast. He does, however, take them into his confidence, explain his problems, and show how their contributions are carrying the Faith forward, and how, without the fund, activity must cease. Once in a while he tells, not mentioning names, the story of some outstanding sacrifice that has come to his attention. Each Assembly member is the voice of such community members as elected him. I do not mean that the voters can exert pressure on him and get him to speak for them — nothing so clumsy as that. I mean that, automatically, different voters elect different types of people. One can state it better by saying that this and that quality in a given Bahá'í community finds expression in the ballot.

We should pause here and examine the voter. He wields terrific power. The fate of his community for the year is placed in his hands. One thing seems apparent in Bahá'í community life—we do not really know an individual until we have served on a committee with him; for this reason it is a good idea to place every member of the community on committees. Everyone is charming over a tea-cup, or when viewed from the lecture platform; but it is only after a period of what is often real suffering on committees that his aptitudes become known. And like Assembly members, committee members can discipline one another by insisting that Bahá'í procedures be followed—in this way training one another for possible future Assembly work.

Maturity in voting is a goal that may take a long time to reach. We should not vote for a person unless we have a pretty fair idea of how he will behave on the Assembly. We should not vote for him because he has had terrible sorrows and needs to be cheered up, or because his great-aunt was an early believer, or because we can spell his name. In voting we are creating a body which is to serve us for an entire year. The year's fate hangs on the names we write down.

The new voter will often find himself relying on material considerations when he sits down to fill out his ballot. But the oldtimer comes to realize that he can vote for a cripple in a charity hospital providing after reflection and prayer, he feels that this individual has the qualities defined by the Guardian: "unquestioned loyalty...selfless devotion...a well-trained mind...recognized ability and mature experience." In American life we occasionally see elected bodies blamed for every thing that goes wrong; these bodies are apparently set up as targets for malcontents; we are told that if only they were out and some other group were in we would have utopia immediately. In Bahá'í administrative life, however, there is no "we" and "they"; one could say that the Assembly is the community in action; one could also say that the Assembly mirrors the community.

Sometimes you will hear this comment: Our Assembly doesn't meet very often, because there isn't much work to do. The answer to that is: Meet more often and there will be work. Where do people expect the work to come from? The Tehran Assembly, if memory serves, meets every night. A good community pushes its Assembly, never giving it a moment's rest; a good Assembly harries its community, always urging it forward. The combined process is something like a wheel going round.

Incidentally, if you are in doubt as to the duties of a Bahá'í Assembly, read page 33 of Bahá'í Administration.

True Bahá'í consultation is something to remember. In those moments when we, groping toward the techniques of the future, experience collective harmony—when we become, briefly, a composite reflection of spiritual light—the world is a lovely place to be in. Perhaps, to the amateur, pleasure results when a committee reaches harmony because of the members' similarity to one another; to the connoisseur, however, the real joy of harmony is only reached when dissimilarities are at work together—when opposites are reconciled—when tension is balanced, poised, distributed. The more truly Bahá'í a community is, the more varied it will be, and the more varied its Assembly membership. Youth is there with the faults of youth, age with the faults of age. The fluttery blonde is there, along with the judge and the garbage man; the intellectual is there, gravely studying the opinion of the business man who left school when he was twelve. Each is compensating for another's deficiency, each seeing an aspect of the problem that another cannot see, each representing some quality in the community and therefore duty-bound to express his view. A human being is never just right. He is either too young or too old or too middle-aged; tired out from a day's work or fretful with leisure; bowed with care or unsympathetic from lack of sorrow; too poor for breadth of vision or too rich to understand the value of a postage stamp; so bold that he will violate sacred conventions, or so timid that he will apologize for holding a thought; in love, not in love, or at the "dangerous age" —a vague period covering apparently some fifty years of life. All these elements in human nature are teamed on the Assembly, and one makes up for another.

You never know whom you will find as your fellow Assembly-member; but even if you have only been a Bahá'í for a week, your opinion is entitled to as much consideration as anyone else's, if each member is to formulate his view in accord with the Teachings.

A friend of mine was faced with a problem recently and I asked why she did not take it to the Assembly. "I have spoken to all the members individually," she answered. Another believer, member of an Assembly, was consulted on some issue. "The Assembly would say thus and so about it," he replied. I mention these two cases because they represent fairly general attitudes. The first individual had not grasped the fact that the nine persons, consulted separately, were only community members and therefore could not arrive at an Assembly decision. The second had taken it upon himself to think for eight other minds besides his own.

Keith Ransom-Kehler used to explain Bahá'í consultation in a homely but unforgettable way. She said it was like making a soup. One person put in the salt, one the meat, one the vegetables, and so forth. In the end you had not salt, not meat, not vegetables, but something new, the result of all that had been put together.

In successful Bahá'í consultation, every member is happy with the result, or at least satisfied with the way the consultation has proceeded.
Business as the world conducts it apparently means to go to work on a majority, win them over to your side, and carry your vote: you then gloat politely over the defeated side, and go home and tell your wife how you laid down the law. This is not Baha' consultation. The Bahá'í Assembly member has no side to take, except insofar as all nine members are on the same side: they all want the greatest good of the Cause. The Bahá'í Assembly member does not attend the meeting to railroad a thing through. He attends to find out what his opinion will be after he has heard eight other opinions. Since he sees a question from his angle only, he knows that he must add eight other versions of a problem to his own, in order to reach a decision in accord with Bahá'í administrative principles. The best decision is that which has assimilated all nine opinions, and in this light a Bahá'í Assembly is structurally very like the Temple at Wilmette.
Assembly members should see to it that no one leaves the meeting with the feeling that he has been unjustly treated, stifled, belittle or ignored. A member may, however, feel that he is always in a minority, and that the Assembly is making mistakes. This does not matter. The Teachings require majority decisions, and affirm that even if a mistake is made, this can be rectified providing unity is safeguarded at all times. A particularly gifted member may often find himself in a minority because he is ahead of his fellows. In this case, he should continue patient and loving, for as events prove him right his fellow-members will gradually come to understand and value the particular aspect of truth which he represents.
Resigning in protest is the new Assembly member's invariable first impulse. This move chokes off whatever elements in the community elected him, and also has a harmful effect on his character. After his resignation, he does not quite know what to do with himself; he does not approve of what is going on, but he has thrown away his best means of

correcting it; and his action has lessened the weight his opinions once had in the community, so that the measures he advocates find few supporters. The Bahá'í way is rather to face the guns, to seek out tribulation, not to hide from it. One can, of course, remain a devoted believer and still arrange one's life so as to avoid all administrative responsibilities, but as a rule the cost in character and effectiveness is much too high. Assembly consultation cannot be carried on without extreme courtesy, which may be one reason why courtesy is so much stressed by Bahá'u'lláh. Interruption, raising of the voice, unpleasant facial expressions—such as we see on many a secular committee—certainly are not proper to a gathering which is looking for truth in the laboratory sense. If the chairman gives each of you the floor—as he must, and through many sessions, if need be till a satisfactory decision is reached—you do not need to interrupt. If your fellows listen to you carefully as they are duty-bound to do if they are to formulate their own decision in accord with Bahá'í principles—you do not need to raise your voice.

There is a secret, it seems to me, that makes Bahá'í consultation a very easy thing. It is to be found in the Visitation Tablet that we chant in the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The particular words I am thinking of are: "Make me as dust in the pathway of Thy loved ones...." nine persons who are all striving for this goal will experience few adminsitrative difficulties. What it all means, really, is that Assembly members must love one another. If they do not, they will poison their community, which will then become too weak either to attract new members or retain old ones.

A Bahá'í went to 'Akka in the early days and saw the beauty of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He said, "I wish I could take Thy face with me, back to the friends in America." The Master said that My love is My face. Take it to them. Tell them to see Me in their love for one another.

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