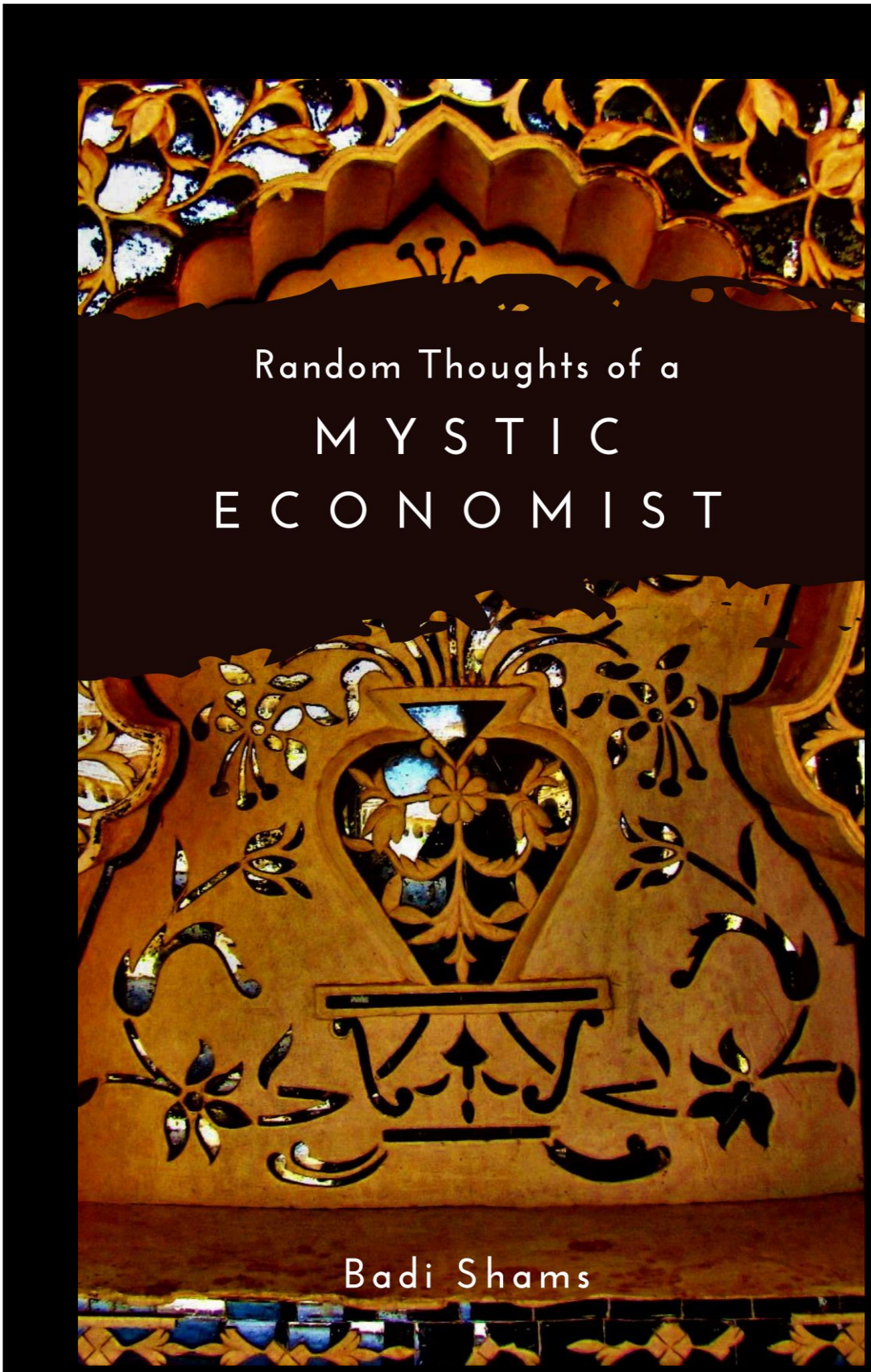
Random Thoughts of a
MYSTIC
ECONOMIST
Badi Shams

Dedicated to

All the Mystics at heart who struggle to survive in this materialistic world without losing their soul

Random Thoughts of a

Mystic Economist

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Introduction

This book is a compilation of my writings at different times and in various situations of my life, describing my thoughts and emotions. They reflect my efforts to follow the Teachings of the Baha'i Faith. They show my love for mysticism and being influenced by mystics like Rumi, Kahlil Gibran, Hafiz, and others. They also highlight my formal training and degrees and informal training from the classroom of life.

I have tried to unite the two forces of spirituality and materialism to serve me. In these modern times, mystics with no financial resources have been denying themselves of contemporary life's realities and unsuccessfully trying to turn the clock back to the past when life was simple.

On the other hand, without mysticism and spirituality filtering our material desires, our souls will suffocate in the atmosphere of materialism and greed caused by our modern economic system.

I believe that both mysticism and economics are gifts from the Creator for us to use wisely.

The key to happiness is balancing these two opposing energies to lead us to a positive and fulfilling life on this earth and prepare us for the next journey to the spiritual world.

In these writings, I hope that the readers will see God's oneness, religion, and humanity's oneness and recognize that all religions teach the same spiritual laws. They may also see my struggles in their struggles, taking comfort in knowing that life is a process of facing challenges in finding the right path to the Beloved.

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Towards A New Spiritual Economic System

Our present economic system is sick and dying and cannot meet the needs of humanity.

The gap between rich and poor continues to grow wider and wider, which has increased the suffering of the masses. The solutions that can heal that suffering have been largely ignored.

The time has come to re-examine the fundamental assumptions that this system was built on and replace them with humane and moral ones. There is a great need to build an economic system that is fit to help humanity achieve its goal of an ever-advancing civilization, a world free of economic injustice, where people have all the necessities of life to live peaceful and fulfilling lives.

To accomplish all this, we need a shift in thinking. The Baha'i Teachings provide insights and suggestions to lay the foundation for a better economic future. We have the solutions and the technology to build a new system; all we need is the resolve and the will. Everyone has an inherent power to contribute and participate in this wonderful process. The time for action is upon us:

The welfare of any segment of humanity is inextricably bound up with the welfare of the whole. Humanity's collective life suffers when any one group thinks of its own well-being in isolation from that of its neighbours' or pursues economic gain without regard for how the natural environment, which provides sustenance for all, is affected. A stubborn obstruction, then, stands in the way of meaningful social progress: time and again, avarice and self-interest prevail at the expense of the common good. Unconscionable quantities of wealth are being amassed, and the instability this creates is made worse by how income and opportunity are spread so unevenly both between nations and within nations. But it need not be so. – The Universal House of Justice, 1 March 2017.

Unfortunately, today, money is the yardstick we use to measure failure and success. This yardstick has derailed humanity from its spiritual path. Baha'is all around the world work towards a day when we will grow and expand our horizons and adopt a more spiritual yardstick for human achievements.

Money cannot and should not be the only means of measuring our lives. But now we are far from that future and need to remember that a new economic system will occur when humanity and society's spiritual transformation has been accomplished and with it, man's awareness of his spiritual station and his destiny.

In that future state of society, we will have subordinated our lower nature and behave less selfishly. Yes, at this time, it is almost impossible to imagine such a society. But by introducing more spiritual qualities in our individual lives, we are laying the foundation for such a society and an economic system. This goal may seem idealistic—but we are all dreaming of a better world and, with it, a new economic system. First, let us try to understand economics from the Baha'i point of view:

The secrets of the whole economic question are Divine in nature, and are concerned with the world of the heart and spirit. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Baha'i World*, Volume IV, p. 448.

We can empower ourselves to accelerate this fundamental change by being aware of things we can do to reach a better economic system. If we find an answer to the essential questions in life –"who am I," "what is the purpose of my life?" and "how much is enough," we may then choose to live a simple life and determine to resist the consumer mentality and the tendency to buy the latest models when the old ones still function.

Suppose we approach work as a form of worship and spend as much energy in being contented and detached from material possessions as we spend getting them. In that case, we will transform ourselves into happier beings. Using honesty as our yardstick, we can avoid following society's shortcuts regarding taxation, insurance and expense claims. As business owners, we can practice contentment with a reasonable margin of profit and charge just interest rates, provide medical coverage, pay fair wages and share the profits we make with our employees. We can be honest about our products, fill out tenders and contracts and look for opportunities to help employees, co-workers, and even competitors. We can use excellent quality material without waste and environmentally harmful ingredients.

As consumers, we can be knowledgeable about the lure of advertising and be honest in job interviews. We can report when we have been undercharged. We can replace competition with co-operation. If we truly follow a moral path in all our dealings, we will find ways to change the status quo by voluntarily contributing to charities and funds to bridge the gap between the rich and the poor.

Small changes in our attitude will change our daily economic activities, eventually leading us to a new economic system based on humanity, not

greed. We have tremendous power as individuals to transform society and raise the standards for economic interactions. We owe it to all the poor and underprivileged people of the world who our present economic system has ignored. Their suffering is our failure to make a change.

The Connection Between Spiritual Principles and Financial Planning

I have often been asked by young people or their parents how they should plan to start their economic journey. It is a journey that has caused the ruin of many wise and spiritual individuals as they sink into the depths of the bottomless ocean of materialism.

There is nothing wrong with planning for a successful financial life and becoming wealthy, provided we realize that wealth can be a beautiful and a God-given tool to use to support our families and give service to humanity. The emphasis must be that it is a tool and not the goal for our creation.

Abdu'l-Baha, one of the central figures of the Baha'i Faith, wrote that:

"Wealth is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired by an individual's own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, art and industry, and if it be expended for philanthropic purposes. Above all, if a judicious and resourceful individual should initiate measures which would universally enrich the masses of the people, there could be no undertaking greater than this, and it would rank in the sight of God as the supreme achievement, for such a benefactor would supply the needs and insure the comfort and well-being of a great multitude. Wealth is most commendable, provided the entire population is wealthy."

We can teach the next generation to plan for their future and not feel guilty about acquiring wealth, provided they include spirituality in their financial plans. A balanced financial plan consists of both material goals and spiritual aspirations. Such a plan has the potential of guiding young people to the full enjoyment of the fruit of their hard work through success financially and spiritually.

The pressure to plan for the future in our materialistic world is a great challenge even for mature adults, so it must be more challenging for the young. With so many crises going on today, it is difficult for many young people to imagine themselves in the future and see their place in it. I think about them and worry for their future — a future that seemingly does not look as bright as it did for me. Added to the age-old sentiment of not being taken seriously by the older generation, they face environmental challenges, fewer job opportunities, and a lack of job security. This pandemic also is a reminder that they may face more challenges of that kind in the future.

In many countries, parents plan for their kids to become doctors, engineers, or follow the family business. Here in the West, the trend is to plan to earn lots of money. In this way, parents have decided their child's life's plan for them, and this support system is outdated. My heart goes out to young people who, pressured by the old ways, are trying to chart their path to the future.

Parents may also fail to teach their children the concept of delayed gratification. Those who practice delayed gratification demonstrate a well-defined purpose in life and the need for accomplishing worthwhile goals. Delayed gratification means accepting the awareness of life's journey as a long one and planning for it. As Canadian motivational speaker, Brian Tracy put it, "The ability to discipline yourself to delay gratification in the short term in order to enjoy greater rewards in the long term, is the indispensable prerequisite for success." Speaking of children, Abdu'l-Baha, one of the central figures of the Baha'i Faith, advised parents to lovingly **"accustom them to hardship."** He wrote:

"While the children are yet in their infancy feed them from the breast of heavenly grace, foster them in the cradle of all excellence, rear them in the embrace of bounty. Give them the advantage of every useful kind of knowledge. Let them share in every new and rare and wondrous craft and art. Bring them up to work and strive, and accustom them to hardship. Teach them to dedicate their lives to matters of great import, and inspire them to undertake studies that will benefit mankind."

But to protect their children, parents may avoid creating such conditions and seek to protect their children from any form of hardship. In addition, the education system, which should be preparing youth for the future, seems to be failing them. Many of my ex-students confessed that their years in school were wasted since they did not learn the basics of economic life and how to plan a practical economic path for their future.

Unfortunately, the education system has become a steppingstone for material success without considering other aspects of young people's lives — the moral and spiritual aspects. Their schooling may lead them to material success but at the cost of their spiritual and human duties to themselves and humanity. They become one-sided individuals who have put all their energies into material achievements, forgetting to nurture their souls. Why? Because when they chart their future, they do not consider their spiritual goals.

I am reminded of this quotation from Abdu'l-Baha:

For man two wings are necessary. One wing is physical power and material civilization; the other is spiritual power and divine civilization. With one wing only, flight is impossible. Two wings are essential. Therefore, no matter how much material civilization advances, it cannot attain to perfection except through the uplift of spiritual civilization.

The most significant benefit of a balanced economic plan in life is that no matter who charts the financial goals, whether parents or the social trends, youth have the power to attach to it their spiritual and moral goals. In case their financial goals fail, spiritual goals can give them peace of mind that they did not waste God's precious gift of life chasing only economic aims. Spiritual goals also help them avoid the world's material traps.

We can offer our young generation the best gift by reminding them that they should not forget their spiritual goals, duties, and obligations and ensure that a spiritual plan is an integral part of their future economic planning.

How to Start Selflessly Serving Others

Every concerned citizen of this world struggles to balance their time, juggling efforts at spiritual growth, family life, work, and community commitments.

No thanks to technological advancement, with so many gadgets that enable us to multitask more and more, we have been transformed from human beings to human doings.

Also, the rampant spread of materialism threatens our spiritual growth and drains our energy. Given all this frenetic activity, how can we have time for one more thing—one more social action, one more commitment? Though providing a service to others may initially sound like one more chore to fit into our already busy lives, in reality, it does not necessarily need to become a big project. Any look, gesture, word or action that helps others can give the gift of an act of service.

The concept of service is nothing new to most of us. We have a wealth of spiritual teachings on this subject from many religious sources, philosophers, poets, great thinkers and humanitarians. We know how holy figures like Jesus, Muhammad, Mahatma Gandhi and Abdu'l-Baha exemplified service throughout their lives:

For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. – Mark 10:45.

And do not forget to do good to one another. – Quran 2:238.

That one indeed is a man who, today, dedicateth himself to the service of the entire human race. – Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 250.

The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others. – Mahatma Gandhi

Service to humanity is service to God. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 8.

How else can our world become united if its citizens don't try to help each other? How else can the sufferings of the world be reduced? Like you and

me, the ordinary people of the world will ultimately make a difference and make this earth a better and more peaceful place—if we take one more extra step to help our fellow human beings.

The Baha'i teachings encourage all people to extend themselves into the arena of service to others:

A Baha'i who serves others is like unto a candle which burns and sheds light upon all those who circle around it. The highest attainable station of the candle is to burn and brighten the dark room, and the loftiest pinnacle of our progress and perfection is to be confirmed in service… – Abdu'l-Baha, *Star of the West*, Volume 8, p. 61.

Let's revisit this concept of service in each of our lives, and with the help of the brief list below, look at the many possibilities of service open to us. You can get involved with some service that fulfils your commitment and connects you to the larger community. This may also create more opportunities to meet people and introduce the concept of service to others in the best light possible through your actions. This list of service opportunities may help you find a service matching your talent or your passion:

- Doing one's job the best way possible is not only a great service—the Baha'i teachings considered it an act of worship
- Offering others your best self with a kind gesture, a kind word, a kind act. Give random acts of kindness: paying for someone in front of you in line, giving your place in line to someone in a rush, presenting a stranger with a bouquet of flowers, mowing the neighbour's lawn.
- Visiting and volunteering in senior facilities, group homes and hospitals
- Driving people to appointments, or shopping and cleaning for your neighbours
- Volunteering in women's centers, treatment facilities, homeless shelters and organizations
- Teaching classes: dance, music, art, sports, literacy, computers and many other subjects
- Calling or visiting those in need—offering your companionship to people
- Teaching house repair, appliance repair or car repair
- Helping refugees and newcomers, volunteering with the Welcome Wagon
- Offering counselling, medical or legal services
- Doing the sets, makeup or costumes for plays
- And simply remember, in your thoughts and prayers, those who are going through a difficult time.

As you embark on your quest to serve humanity, here are a few words of caution: Please make sure, while offering your services, that you respect the boundaries of agencies, individuals, and families. Also, focus on why

you're there serving. Some people volunteer in organizations for self-recognition or out of boredom and don't really capture the essence of serving others with selfless intention. Be aware of this in any voluntary situation, so it doesn't discourage you or negatively influence you.

However, if you approach the opportunity to serve others with a radiant countenance and the pure motivation of kindness and love, you'll find that the gifts you give will come back to you a thousand fold.

Gross National Happiness & Other Spiritual Approaches to Wealth

We live in an age in which new ideas are born each day in every field of learning. I find the many alternative ideas and theories that suggest new ways of solving our economic problems quite interesting. As a member of the Baha'i Faith, I like to examine these theories from a Baha'i point of view. You may be wondering what needs fixing in the current economic situation in the world. One worthy answer to that question can be found in these words of Abdu'l-Baha:

Although the body politic is one family yet because of lack of harmonious relations some members are comfortable and some in direst misery, some members are satisfied, and some are hungry, some members are clothed in most costly garments and some families are in need of food and shelter. Why? Because this family lacks the necessary reciprocity and symmetry. This household is not well arranged. This household is not living under a perfect law. All the laws which are legislated do not ensure happiness. They do not provide comfort. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 38.

Of all the new concepts out there, I am especially attracted to two: Gross National Happiness and "barefoot economics."

Gross National Happiness

As you probably know, the Gross National Product (GNP)—the total production of a given country—is the yardstick typically used to measure economic progress or growth. A higher GNP means more production and more growth in a given country. However, other concepts such as Gross National Happiness (GNH) have challenged the GNP's effectiveness.

A philosophy introduced by the king of Bhutan in 1972, GNH is calculated by an index that measures the collective happiness and well-being of a population. GNH is the goal of the government of Bhutan, as stated in its constitution, which was enacted on 18 July 2008. The Bhutan GNH Index was first published in 2012.

GNH values collective happiness as the goal of governance by emphasizing harmony with nature and traditional values as expressed in nine domains of happiness and four pillars of GNH. The four pillars are:

1. Sustainable and equitable socio-economic development
2. Environmental conservation
3. Preservation and promotion of culture
4. Good governance

The nine domains of GNH are psychological well-being, health, time use, education, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity, and living standards.

"Barefoot Economics"

Acclaimed Chilean economist Manfred Max-Neef introduced the concept of "barefoot economics" in the 1980s. He explained, "The point is, you know, that economists study and analyze poverty in their nice offices, have all the statistics, make all the models, and are convinced that they know everything that you can know about poverty. But they don't understand poverty." – Daniel Margrain, "Stepping in the mud with the barefoot economist Max-Neef," Scisco Media, 24 November 2016.

Max-Neef believes we have to look at economics with a new approach and change it fundamentally—or else humanity is bound to have a disastrous future. He says a good economic system has to be desirable to everyone since one is supposed to be designed and implemented for everyone. He is disappointed that most governments and economists in the world failed to learn from the financial crisis of 2008—even though they acknowledge the current economic system isn't working (and some even say it's poisonous).

Max-Neef suggests we build a new economic system based on five postulates and one fundamental value. The five postulates are:

1. The economy exists to serve the people, rather than the people existing to serve the economy
2. Development is about people and not about objects
3. Growth is not the same as development, and development does not necessarily require growth
4. No economy is possible in the absence of ecosystem services
5. The economy is a subsystem of a larger finite system, the biosphere, and so permanent growth is impossible

The fundamental value for sustaining a new economy should be that economic interest will never be allowed, under any circumstances, to be valued above reverence of life.

Correlation With The Baha'i Teachings

The central themes of GNH and "barefoot economics"—humanity's happiness and respect for nature— are valued in the Baha'i teachings. It's exciting to me that so many people with great awareness are looking at the world's economic problems and offering remedies for its ills. I believe some of these wonderful ideas offered by so many amazing people will be considered for and incorporated into future economic systems. At the same time, it can be confusing to read, study, and try to synthesize all these different concepts and ideas, so I often use the Baha'i writings as my yardstick to place them in context and assess their value and effectiveness in solving economic problems. In that spirit, I'll close with two passages sharing Baha'i perspectives on economics and how to effect fundamental economic change:

The secrets of the whole economic question are divine in nature, and are concerned with the world of the heart and spirit. In the Baha'i teachings this is most completely explained, and without the consideration of the Baha'i teachings, it is impossible to bring about a better state. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Star of the West*, Volume 22, Issue 3, p. 75.

By the statement 'the economic solution is divine in nature' is meant that religion alone can, in the last resort, bring in man's nature such a fundamental change as to enable him to adjust the economic relationships of society. It is only in this way that man can control the economic forces that threaten to disrupt the foundations of his existence, and thus assert his mastery over the forces of nature. – Shoghi Effendi, 26 December 1935, letter to an individual believer.

Making Sense of These Confusing Times

These days, the world's events baffle both the learned and the ignorant, confuse the young and the old, and perplex people of all ideologies and religions.

Because I'm a Baha'i, strangers and friends want to know what I think about the world's seemingly unresolvable problems. Even if they don't know much about the Baha'i Faith, they usually have some sense that my Faith gives me reasons to view world events differently. So I tell them that Baha'is believe humanity's future is bright and that humanity cannot resolve these upheavals using ideologies of bygone days or even today's digital database solutions.

They wonder about the source of these problems, and I am compelled to tell them that the Baha'i teachings cite the lack of morality and lack of spirituality in the world:

All conditions and requisites of the past unfitted and inadequate for the present time are undergoing radical reform. It is evident, therefore, that counterfeit and spurious religious teaching, antiquated forms of belief and ancestral imitations which are at variance with the foundations of divine reality must also pass away and be reformed. They must be abandoned and new conditions be recognized. The morals of humanity must undergo change. New remedies and solutions for human problems must be adopted. Human intellects themselves must change and be subject to the universal reformation. Just as the thoughts and hypotheses of past ages are fruitless today, likewise dogmas and codes of human invention are obsolete and barren of product in religion. Nay, it is true that they are the cause of enmity and conducive to strife in the world of humanity; war and bloodshed proceed from them, and the oneness of mankind finds no recognition in their observance. Therefore, it is our duty in this radiant century to investigate the essentials of divine religion, seek the realities underlying the oneness of the world of humanity and discover the source of fellowship and agreement which will unite mankind in the heavenly bond of love. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 143.

Humanity has lost its moral compass, and even human history cannot help us find our way out because the rate of change has accelerated so fast that

we have no historical reference point. But we do know how many times humanity has reached the point of no return and has found a way out of seemingly impossible situations. World War II is an excellent example of when everything seemed very dark and hopeless, yet the forces of good managed to prevail.

Regardless of past history, though, it's hard to deny the gravity of our present world situation: the plight of millions of refugees who are running from terror and economic misery, the extreme nationalism leading to the election of governments throughout the world that enforce strict border controls, leaving migrant populations to endure in demeaning conditions; climate change that threatens the existence of the world to the point that the young generation wonders if it has a future; the religious fundamentalism and fanaticism spreading in every corner of the world, the glut of misinformation and propaganda that has replaced decency, respectful discourse and facts.

The Baha'i writings have helped me clarify what is happening and how the future will look. I believe in humanity's resilience and also believe in the reality of Divine guidance, which has helped humanity to reach this point from our beginnings in the Stone Age. I see the present situation in the world as a process that humanity has to endure because when Baha'u'llah proclaimed his message to the rulers and the people of the world, he warned them about the consequences of their denial:

The world is in travail and its agitation waxeth day by day. Its face is turned toward waywardness and unbelief. Such shall be its plight that to disclose it now would not be meet and seemly. Its perversity will long continue. And when the appointed hour is come, there shall suddenly appear that which shall cause the limbs of mankind to quake. Then, and only then, will the Divine Standard be unfurled, and the Nightingale of Paradise warble its melody. – Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 118.

That nothing short of the fire of a severe ordeal, unparalleled in its intensity, can fuse and weld the discordant entities that constitute the elements of present-day civilization, into the integral components of the world commonwealth of the future, is a truth which future events will increasingly demonstrate. – Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'llah*, p. 46.

Humanity today stands at a crossroads, and every individual has the privilege to be part of the plan to lead it toward unity and harmony. So I tell my friends that though they have an accurate picture of the problems in the world, they are wrong to give up and accept defeat while the struggle between the forces of construction and destruction plays out all around us.

These upheavals send us signals so that we can play our part in preparing for a new spiritually-based system of global governance:

Through the power of Baha'u'llah all will be united. He upraised this standard of the oneness of humanity in prison. When subjected to banishment by two kings, while a refugee from enemies of all nations and during the days of His long imprisonment He wrote to the kings and rulers of the world in words of wonderful eloquence, arraigning them severely and summoning them to the divine standard of unity and justice. He exhorted them to peace and international agreement, making it incumbent upon them to establish a board of international arbitration—that from all nations and governments of the world there should be delegates selected for a congress of nations which should constitute a universal arbitral court of justice to settle international disputes. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 202-203.

As for the present time trends, it seems that in most cases, kindness and cooperation towards our fellow humans have taken a back seat to nationalism and self-interest. I believe that these trends are the "last hurrahs" of the decaying old order, whose followers are making a desperate attempt to hold on to political control. Yes, the world's changes are rapid and confusing, and most of the people in charge of making policies and laws cling to short-sighted goals instead of working for the betterment of the conditions of the world in all areas of life.

But all of this upheaval provides us with the opportunity to re-examine our values, to take hold of the vision of a united and peaceful world, and to become a powerful part of its construction of a better future.

Karma, the Golden Rule and Newton's Third Law

We've all heard about the law of karma—or, if you prefer a more scientific approach, the law of cause and effect. Essentially, both describe the same underlying principle.

These two laws of karma and causality—the concepts that are commonly associated with Buddhist, Hindu, Jain, and many other religious traditions—essentially say that every action has a consequence: good actions will inevitably have good consequences.

Most people believe in those laws, which basically state that any individual's intent and actions will influence their future. That's beautiful because any concept that makes us think about our actions' consequences will help us become better people, making the world a better place.

The law of karma makes us aware of our responsibility for our actions and creates the rational fear of committing an unkind act, mainly because we do not want the same thing to happen to us.

You can compare the law of karma with Newton's third law of motion in a scientific sense. Simply put, this law states that for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. Newton proposed it to describe physics' laws in the material universe—but it also expresses the truth of our spiritual reality. In fact, karma, causality and Newton's third law all express the same thing, and when combined, they express something even more profound—the essential harmony of science and religion.

The Baha'i writings explicitly endorse that harmony. Without it, they say, superstitions and dogmas ruin the purity of religion. Religious history offers many examples of this fact, where spiritual laws gradually turned into meaningless rituals and denial of scientific reality:

Religion and Science are inter-twined with each other and cannot be separated. These are the two wings with which humanity must fly. One wing is not enough. Every religion which does not concern itself with science is mere tradition …. Therefore science, education and civilization are most important necessities for the full religious life.
– Abdu'l-Baha, *Abdu'l-Baha in London*, p. 29.

God has endowed man with intelligence and reason whereby he is required to determine the verity of questions and propositions. If religious beliefs and opinions are found contrary to the standards of science they are mere superstitions and imaginations; for the antithesis of knowledge is ignorance, and the child of ignorance is superstition. Unquestionably there must be agreement between true religion and science. If a question be found contrary to reason, faith and belief in it are impossible … – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 181.

According to the basic Sanskrit definition, karma simply means "action." In essence, everything we do creates corresponding energy that comes back to us in some form or another—or, as the common phrase says, "what goes around comes around."

Newton's third law says: For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction. When applied, we know that physical force will cause a reaction and that no force or energy vanishes into nothing.

A word or an action by a person releases energies, too, just like the physical forces that affect the material world. These energies could be positive or negative, and the returning energies reflect that original intent.

The Baha'i teachings remind us about the consequences of our negative actions and why we should be conscious of them:

O companion of my throne! Hear no evil, and see no evil, abase not thyself, neither sigh and weep. Speak no evil, that thou mayest not hear it spoken unto thee, and magnify not the faults of others that thine own faults may not appear great; and wish not the abasement of anyone, that thine own abasement be not exposed. Live then the days of thy life, that are less than a fleeting moment, with thy mind stainless, thy heart unsullied, thy thoughts pure, and thy nature sanctified, so that, free and content, thou mayest put away this mortal frame, and repair unto the mystic paradise and abide in the eternal kingdom for evermore. – Baha'u'llah, *The Hidden Words*, p. 37.

These two laws may explain why all religions and philosophers have universally agreed on the Golden Rule concept, which has been expressed in different wordings in many religions. The Golden Rule looks like the by-product of these two laws. What one puts in, whether physical or spiritual, that same energy will eventually come back. The Golden Rule makes us aware of our actions to ponder the outcome before we take any action or apply any force.

Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful. – Buddhism

In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets. – Christianity

One word which sums up the basis of all good conduct…loving-kindness. Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself. – Confucianism

This is the sum of duty; do naught onto others what you would not have them do unto you. – Hinduism

Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself. – Islam.

What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbour. This is the entire Law; all the rest is commentary. Go and learn it. – Judaism

Do not wrong or hate your neighbor. For it is not he who you wrong, but yourself. – Native American Pima Proverb

Do not do unto others whatever is injurious to yourself. – Zoroastrianism

The Baha'i teachings express the Golden Rule this way:

Lay not on any soul a load that you would not wish to be laid upon you, and desire not for anyone the things you would not desire for yourself. – Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 129.

So, the conclusion becomes very clear whether we look at our actions through Newton's law, the law of karma, or the Golden Rule. All of those immutable laws tell us that we should be very considerate and mindful of our actions because they always have consequences. In a sense, we create our own happiness, misery, hell and heaven.

Although we may never feel the results of our actions in this temporal world, those karmic consequences have more significance when seen in the light of our spiritual journey beyond this earthly life. Though these laws encourage us to be thoughtful about our actions lest we hurt someone, that is not the highest goal for us. Our goal is to achieve what Abdu'l-Baha has asked us to become:

Man is he who forgets his own interests for the sake of others. His own comfort he forfeits for the well-being of all. … Nay, rather, his own life must he be willing to forfeit for the life of mankind. Such a man is the

honor of the world of humanity. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Star of the West*, Volume 6, p. 304.

Religious Prejudice: A Personal Journey from East to West

The world at the moment faces many difficulties, and the foundations of our civilization have been threatened. One of those challenges is religious prejudice. However, during a recent trip to a town in India, I witnessed something inspiring: people from different faiths coming together in unity. This reminded me that fostering the understanding that all religions are one and come from the same divine source is key to solving this world's challenges.

I travelled to India to get away from the consumerism of Christmas. Once there, one of the churches in town invited me to celebrate Christmas with them. I really like the idea of commemorating religious occasions with followers of any religion since it creates unity.

My dedication to eliminating racial prejudice comes, in part, from my own experience. I was born in Iran to a family that was all Muslims — except for my father, who was a Baha'i. My family exposed me to all the Islamic ceremonies and events, and my father tried to connect me to the Baha'i teachings. The sentiments of my Islamic environment influenced me. For example, I wanted badly to participate in the anniversary of the third Imam of Shi'a Islam's martyrdom and beat my chest to mourn his death, even though it happened centuries ago.

But when I chose to become a member of the Baha'i Faith, I became a target. I experienced a rude awakening at a tender age — my family members, my cousins, and even my grandma saw me as an inferior being. I heard many negative comments made about the followers of other religions but never about Moses or Jesus. Jesus' name is mentioned more than 51 times in the Qur'an. That is because Jesus and Moses have been given the same station as Mohammad, one of God's Prophets, sent by God to guide humanity.

Say (O Muslims): We believe in Allah and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered. - The Qur'an, Sura 2 – The Heifer

This is no different from what the Baha'i Writings teach:

It is clear and evident to thee that all the Prophets are the Temples of the Cause of God, Who have appeared clothed in diverse attire. If thou wilt observe with discriminating eyes, thou wilt behold Them all abiding in the same tabernacle, soaring in the same heaven, seated upon the same throne, uttering the same speech, and proclaiming the same Faith. Such is the unity of those Essences of Being, those Luminaries of infinite and immeasurable splendor! – Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah***.**

Later in life, in the 1980s, I moved to Canada. I had all these ideas about meeting people with whom I could talk and even disagree. That was my second — and perhaps worse — a rude awakening. To my shock, I witnessed a lack of knowledge and prejudice towards Muslims in particular and other minorities in general. As a Baha'i, I faced some persecution by some of the Muslims in Canada — and now people also called me "Muslim" and told me to go back where I had come from.

I could not believe Westerners were so unaware of the truth about Islam. Most interpreted the actions of some Muslims as Islamic laws. In a peace walk and on other occasions, I tried to remind my fellow peace lovers about the role religious prejudice plays in creating wars and the importance of fighting them. After all, silence on prejudice is equal to supporting it and enabling it.

A concept addresses the problem of religious prejudice emphasized in the Baha'i teachings: the individual independent investigation of truth. I've seen firsthand how searching for truth for oneself — rather than following what others say — changes hearts and ends prejudice.

Abdu'l Baha wrote:

…every individual member of humankind is exhorted and commanded to set aside superstitious beliefs, traditions and blind imitation of ancestral forms in religion and investigate reality for himself. Inasmuch as the fundamental reality is one, all religions and nations of the world will become one through investigation of reality. – Abdu'l Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*.

With that in mind, the Christmas observance in India turned out to be very special.

The church also invited local dignitaries, other representatives from federal and local governments, and all the leaders and representatives of all the

religions in town. They even requested that a religious leader who belonged to no religion be present.

Everyone talked about the message of love that Jesus preached and reminded us how that message is still relevant and needed.

One of the speakers who represented a mosque in town surprised me by addressing followers of his own religion and quoting from the Quran:

"Those messengers – some of them We caused to exceed others. Among them were those to whom Allah spoke, and He raised some of them in degree. And We gave Jesus, the Son of Mary, clear proofs, and We supported him with the Pure Spirit." – Qur'an 2:253.

This speaker further addressed his fellow Muslims and said that you are not a true Muslim if you do not believe in Jesus and give Him the reverence befitting His station.

I was touched by this gesture of fighting prejudice from within — a Muslim speaker reminding other Muslims in what light they have to see Jesus.

We must hold on to fundamental truths such as the oneness of God, the oneness of the source of all religions being one, and, most importantly, the oneness of mankind. To offset the harm of religious prejudice, let's investigate the truth about other faiths. There is so much common ground in all religions — much more than any differences.

Simple Living a Solution in Times of Crisis

In recent times, the events of the world have again turned our attention to what is essential for our existence and what things are mere distractions and not necessary.

When we face a situation where we have to decide what is necessary, we are surprised to see how simple our needs are. You can listen to the stories of people who have faced death or a deadly disease and realize how wealth and possessions lose their charms and don't matter at all.

Throughout human history, we have examples of great people like the Sufis and the followers of other religions who practiced simplicity and advocated living a simple life and avoiding the complications that excess materialism brings with it. Manifestations of God like Jesus, Mohammad, Buddha, Moses, and Baha'u'llah, the Prophet-Founder of the Baha'i Faith, exemplified simple living.

However, we also have the example of other people who were regular people like you and me — such as Gandhi, who famously said, **"Live simply so that others may simply live."** They showed us how simple living is done by practicing it.

Industrialization has brought with it the ability to have things that past generations could not dream of. It has led to us accumulating things that seemed necessary, and yet, in reality, we could easily do without them. This has brought us to where we are now. When a pandemic suddenly makes us think about what is essential and what is not. It teaches us how we can do with so little. Abdu'l-Baha, the son of Baha'u'llah, wrote:

Observe how darkness has overspread the world. In every corner of the earth there is strife, discord and warfare of some kind. Mankind is submerged in the sea of materialism and occupied with the affairs of this world. They have no thought beyond earthly possessions and manifest no desire save the passions of this fleeting, mortal existence. Their utmost purpose is the attainment of material livelihood, physical comforts and worldly enjoyments such as constitute the happiness of the animal world rather than the world of man. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*

Living a simple life brings peace of mind and removes some of the distractions of our life's journey. Many studies indicate that simplicity reduces stress in life and creates a sense of freedom from the burden of unnecessary possessions.

For those of us who prefer other ways than the religious approach of denouncing material possessions, there is a movement called "voluntary simplicity." It encourages people to live a simple life by downsizing their lives. This movement has been described as "an anti-consumerist way of life that opposes the high consumption lifestyles prevalent in consumer societies today and voluntarily embraces 'a simpler life' of reduced consumption."

Voluntary simplicity counters the effects of collecting possessions and believing that they are necessary for our survival. In reality, possessions often complicate our lives by making us feel dependent on them. This way of thinking has led us to forget our spiritual destiny. The Baha'i Writings tell us:

Consider to what a remarkable extent the spirituality of people has been overcome by materialism so that spiritual susceptibility seems to have vanished, divine civilization become decadent, and guidance and knowledge of God no longer remain. All are submerged in the sea of materialism. *– Abdu'l-Baha, The Promulgation of Universal Peace*

It should be noted that voluntary simplicity does not mean living in poverty, becoming an ascetic monk, or indiscriminately renouncing all the advantages of science and technology. It does not involve regressing to a primitive state or becoming a self-righteous puritan. And it is not some escapist fad reserved for saints, hippies, or eccentric outsiders. Instead, advocates of voluntary simplicity suggest that we examine our relationships with money, material possessions, the planet, ourselves, and each other. Voluntary simplicity is about discovering the freedom and contentment that comes with knowing how much consumption is enough.

This theme has something to say to everyone, especially those in consumer cultures bombarded daily with thousands of cultural and institutional messages insisting that more is always better. Voluntary simplicity is a philosophy of living that advocates a counter-cultural position based on notions of sufficiency and simplicity.

Voluntary simplicity can create a sense of peace of mind and free us to spend time on the goals that matter more in life. Some of the benefits of living this way are:

Conscious Consumption

Living a simpler life isn't just about spending less — it's also about spending consciously. That means taking a careful look at every purchase and asking yourself whether it's worth the money you're spending and the hours you're spending to make that money.

Fewer Belongings

One side effect of consuming consciously is that you end up with fewer belongings.

Smaller Homes

Housing is the biggest expense in most families' budgets, accounting for 26% of total spending. So, it makes sense that families that want to downshift their spending often start by downsizing their homes. Choosing a small house can also simplify a family's life by giving them less space to maintain and clean and less room to accumulate more stuff.

Lower Energy Use

Another benefit of smaller homes is that they use less energy to heat and cool. By choosing to live small and cutting back on the number of electrical gadgets, people can reduce their electricity use to the point where they can power their homes with solar panels or other forms of renewable energy.

Conscious Eating

For most downshifters, living simply also means eating simply: home-cooked meals made with whole, unprocessed foods.

Shorter Work Hours

Voluntary simplicity isn't just about spending less money. The main point for most downshifters is that, by spending less, they can afford to work less. If we reconnect with what is vital in our lives and worthy of our attention — and what is not — we can simplify our lives. That, in turn, could lead to living a less complicated existence based on solid personal principles. Those principles can guide us through times of crisis without feeling any sense of panic and help us stay firmly focused on the things that matter to our individual and collective progress, both spiritually and materially.

2 Effective Ways to Fight Your Ego, that Dangerous Enemy Within

No matter how we succeed in any field, a great danger exists within us all—the human ego. That common inner enemy has destroyed millions of relationships, careers and lives.

Our ego—the insistent, grasping, demanding lower self inside everyone—can make a lifetime of achievements disappear in an instant. It can manifest itself in the form of a gesture, a look, a word or an action, but the end result is often the same.

When the ego dominates our behaviour, it usually results in a victory for negativity, passivity, or evil forces. Like a volcano ready to erupt, our egos constantly require the supervision of our higher, more spiritual nature.

The Baha'i Faith has numerous spiritual teachings that prepare us to face this lifelong test. The Baha'i writings differentiate between our two selves: our animal, material or lower nature—that insistent self we call the ego—and our spiritual, divine or higher nature:

In man there are two natures; his spiritual or higher nature and his material or lower nature. In one he approaches God, in the other he lives for the world alone. Signs of both these natures are to be found in man. In his material aspects he expresses untruth, cruelty and injustice; all these are the outcomes of his lower nature. The attributes of his divine nature are shown forth in love, mercy, kindness, truth and justice, one and all being expressions of his higher nature. Every good habit, every noble quality belongs to man's spiritual nature, whereas all his imperfections and sinful actions are born of his material nature. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, p. 60.

In our human history and the history of different religions, we can find many examples of how this hidden enemy victimized even good-hearted and spiritual men and women, destroying the great achievements earned in a lifetime. It has been the cause of the downfall of a great many leaders and learners in all walks of life. They could not see it coming or recognize its imminent danger until it was too late.

So, we must be aware of our egos' demands, recognize their signs, offer ways of dealing with them, and find ways to combat them or keep them under control. This awareness is essential for those who want to progress in life both materially and spiritually, presenting us with a lifelong conversation that we have to have with ourselves continually:

A man may converse with the ego within him saying: "May I do this? Would it be advisable for me to do this work?" Such as this is conversation with the higher self. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, p. 179.

From this Baha'i approach, we can see that the human ego is not necessarily always a negative force—but like a spirited animal that can injure us if not kept under control, it requires careful vigilance.

Great religious figures, philosophers, poets and people of vision, such as Rumi, have recognized that truth and warned us to be aware of this invisible and elusive enemy:

Your worst enemy is hiding within yourself, and that enemy is your "nafs" (self) or false ego. – Rumi

Though one should conquer a 1000 times a 1000 men in battle, he who conquers his own self is the greatest of all conquerors. – Gautama Buddha

The lowliest and most abject of all things holdeth sway over thee, and that is none other than self and passion, which have ever been reprehensible. – Baha'u'llah, *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, p. 170.

Though very difficult, there are ways that the insistent self can be contained and subordinated with the help of two age-old methods used by different spiritual disciplines:

1. Self-knowledge

Because it lets us take an inventory of our minds and souls with honesty and the intention of discovering more about who we truly are, self-knowledge represents a valuable tool for controlling the ego. It allows us to discover what abilities we have to face our insistent self; it also helps us find the areas where we will likely be tested and where possibilities of failure exist. This ongoing self-examination process requires the courage to face ourselves as who we are and not who we might wish to be. It requires honest self-examination, which the Baha'i teachings advise us to implement daily:

Bring thyself to account each day ere thou art summoned to a reckoning; for death, unheralded, shall come upon thee and thou shalt be called to give account for thy deeds. – Baha'u'llah, *The Hidden Words*, p. 11.

An added benefit of self-knowledge is the spiritual growth and depth of understanding that comes with that ongoing process:

O, My servants! Could ye apprehend with what wonders of My munificence and bounty I have willed to entrust your souls, ye would, of a truth, rid yourselves of attachment to all created things, and would gain a true knowledge of your own selves—a knowledge which is the same as the comprehension of Mine own Being. – Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, pp. 326-327.

2. Meditation

Research has proven that meditation can strengthen the powers of your higher nature to deal with the challenges of life—and no challenge is bigger than the insistent self residing within:

As long as man is a captive of habit, pursuing the dictates of self and desire, he is vanquished and defeated. This passionate personal ego takes the reins from his hands, crowds out the qualities of the divine ego and changes him into an animal, a creature unable to judge good from evil, or to distinguish light from darkness. He becomes blind to divine attributes … – Abdu'l-Baha, *Divine Philosophy*, p. 133.

We have to deal with our insistent self or ego; otherwise, it can undo any success or progress. Once we recognize it as a serious threat to our good efforts—that our lives and efforts in this world and our progress in the next world depend on our decisions—we will recognize the necessity to be vigilant.

The Baha'i teachings say we make our own heaven and hell here on Earth as a result of the choices we make:

Think ye of love and good fellowship as the delights of heaven, think ye of hostility and hatred as the torments of hell. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha*, p. 245.

If we don't make the right decisions and give our higher nature the upper hand, we can easily fall victim to our lower nature. So, we need to tune ourselves spiritually to make the right choices and receive the rewards and benefits of those choices. When we read the spiritual writings and meditate on their meaning, our souls are uplifted, affecting our decision-making. Our

souls are tuned by reading, praying, meditating, and bringing ourselves to account each day. This important matter has great consequences in our lives, and we need to take the opportunity to adequately deal with it so that our lifelong achievements are not left to our egos.

We Grow When We're Uncomfortable

I always thought that life must be full of happiness without difficulties because God wanted it that way. In my dealings with friends and family, I also observed in my involvement with the education system that we have imparted this expectation to the next generation.

In schools, we would be alarmed if we saw the signs of unhappiness and would start making arrangements to remedy this condition and, in some cases, use the aid of professionals and medications, which are essential in severe and chronic cases. In most cases, it was an interruption of the individuals' process of finding, in a hard way, their place in the universe and figure a course of action.

I was not sure that our interference and interrupting was the right thing to do, knowing how the difficulties, such as facing religious prejudice, racial prejudice, health issues, poverty, and being a refugee for a long time, helped me to be the person that I am today. Those experiences purified my soul and toughened my ability to deal with unexpected events and happenings.

I am so grateful for those difficult times and happy that nothing interrupted that process, even though I hoped it would end.

So the question is, should I not share it if this has been so good for me and how it has made me more reliant on a higher power than my parents, family, and friends? I am so thankful to have experienced them, and I wish that I could impart that feeling to others and explain the benefits of hardships and tests in life. That would be my gift to the next generation.

The cause of most of the problems in our life is our mistakes, but if we were not allowed to make mistakes, why would God give us free will, knowing full well that we will not listen to His teachings and guidance, which He has sent through His Manifestations?

I believe that there is a pearl of wisdom and blessing in tests and difficulties, and many writings from all religions support this. Baha'u'llah, the prophet and founder of the Baha'i Faith, wrote:

. . . the Almighty hath tried, and will continue to try, his servants, so that light may be distinguished from darkness, truth from falsehood,

right from wrong, guidance from error, happiness from misery, and roses from thorns. Even as He hath revealed: 'Do men think when they say "We believe" they shall be let alone and not be put to proof?

Industrialization brought freedom from the physical world, and humanity started to master the elements with the help of inventions. With the invention of the steam engine, the process of conquering the forces of nature accelerated. It led to the construction and improvement of roads, railways, ships, airplanes, and other means of comfort.

The sciences opened up new opportunities to improve humanity's quality of life, which was extremely hard until then. These processes stepped up after the second war. Humanity was intoxicated with a great desire to have more of whatever made life more comfortable. Movies — Hollywood in particular — newspapers, television, radio and other mass media promoted this trend. The education system became a path to achieving money to live a life without discomfort since money could supposedly solve all problems.

Every generation wants the best for the next and tries to make it as easy for them as possible, believing it is the best way to raise or educate children. And they go to great lengths and put so much energy into making things easy for their kids. Parents use their influence and wealth to get them to where they want them to go, living a life of ease and comfort so that they can live happily ever after.

Abdu'l-Baha, the son of Baha'u'llah, reminded us of the important elements of educating the children, and one of the factors is to **"accustom them to hardship."** He wrote:

While the children are yet in their infancy feed them from the breast of heavenly grace, foster them in the cradle of all excellence, rear them in the embrace of bounty. Give them the advantage of every useful kind of knowledge. Let them share in every new and rare and wondrous craft and art. Bring them up to work and strive, and accustom them to hardship. Teach them to dedicate their lives to matters of great import, and inspire them to undertake studies that will benefit mankind.

Going through challenges and overcoming them gives young people self-esteem and confidence, which is essential for their growth. These difficult times are tough and rough on the outside, but have a precious gift inside them.

Overcoming challenges is a learning process in the classroom of life. The point that is ignored is that obstacles, setbacks, sadness, illness, losses, and many more things are incredibly essential for understanding ourselves and

our role in this world. Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith, wrote:

Suffering is both a reminder and a guide. It stimulates us better to adapt ourselves to our environmental conditions, and thus leads the way to self-improvement. In every suffering, one can find meaning and wisdom. But it is not always easy to find the secret of that wisdom. It is sometimes only when all our suffering has passed that we become aware of its usefulness. What a man considers to be evil turns often to be a cause of infinite blessings.

I have not yet heard anyone complaining or questioning why everything is going so right for them. No one goes to a doctor or other professionals to get rid of the extreme feeling of happiness. We have been taught that life has to be a bed of roses, so it is natural to be happy. We have not been taught that difficult times are also crucial and vital for our growth.

We can change our mindset. All religions and great minds have taught us that life is a series of tests and difficulties. The creator designs them to test our physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual aspects of life so that we can find out and realize how we have done at the end of our lives. The price of failing and the reward of overcoming them are too great.

Will it Take a Pandemic to Make the World Economy Humane?

The coronavirus's onset has highlighted the need for economic changes for humanitarian purposes — changes many economists and many everyday people have been crying for. There is a need for an economic system that can adjust to humanity's needs and eliminate the extremes in wealth between the haves and the have-nots.

The problem is the failure to grasp the fact that each of us, from the poorest person to the richest, are the stakeholders in all the affairs of humanity. We all are in this together. That's why I have spent the past 40 years advocating through my books, talks, and articles that we address the nature of economic problems through spiritual solutions. According to the Baha'i Writings:

The secrets of the whole economic question are Divine in nature, and are concerned with the world of the heart and spirit. In the Baha'i Teachings this is most completely explained, and without the consideration of the Baha'i Teachings, it is impossible to bring about a better state. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Baha'i World*

How many religious leaders, philosophers, economic experts, and many more have attempted to bring changes to a system that has been built on the idea of promoting self-interest and individualism without any thought given to creating prosperity for the whole of humanity?

Now, the coronavirus is tearing into those barriers of nationalism, racism, and religious differences and making everyone think, "Oh my God, we all are in this together." This realization weakens those barriers but does not destroy it.

Many experts have explained the need for change and tried to influence those who make and implement the economic system's laws and regulations. In essence, our economic system needs to serve as a means for upholding all its citizens' welfare, not just a small number of wealthy individuals. Yet all these efforts so far have been in vain. Our policymakers don't seem to realize that they have the means to lift millions of people from the misery of poverty or to eradicate diseases that kill millions of poor people.

The question in my mind is, do we need a disaster — like this one that has paralyzed the whole world — to wake us up to the fact that this universe, this earth, has been created by one creator? We are all its occupants, so why don't we act as neighbours or family members? Baha'u'llah, the Prophet-Founder of the Baha'i Faith, wrote that "**The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens"** -Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*

That means we are all members of one family and are like members of one human body:

… the human body, all the members of which are connected and linked with one another with the greatest strength. How much the organs, the members and the parts of the body of man are intermingled and connected for mutual aid and help, and how much they influence one another! – Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*

Why can't we create an economic system so that all the citizens of the world would live fulfilling lives in prosperity?

In this health crisis and other disasters, whether natural or otherwise, the poor and the underprivileged are the ones who suffer the most due to not having the material means to protect themselves. You may ask why? I say because our economic system is set up that way. After all, the economic system is deprived of moral values. This is because we have separated morality and humanity from our economic system and economic activities. This caused the economic system to almost crash in 2008, leading to a financial crisis and a recession. And yet, this system continues to ignore the plight of the poor.

A 2017 letter from the international administrative body of the Baha'i Faith, The Universal House of Justice addresses this issue:

The welfare of any segment of humanity is inextricably bound up with the welfare of the whole. Humanity's collective life suffers when any one group thinks of its own well-being in isolation from that of its neighbours' or pursues economic gain without regard for how the natural environment, which provides sustenance for all, is affected. A stubborn obstruction, then, stands in the way of meaningful social progress: time and again, avarice and self-interest prevail at the expense of the common good. Unconscionable quantities of wealth are being amassed, and the instability this creates is made worse by how income and opportunity are spread so unevenly both between nations and within nations. But it need not be so. However much such conditions are the outcome of history, they do not have to define the future, and even if current approaches to economic life satisfied

humanity's stage of adolescence, they are certainly inadequate for its dawning age of maturity. There is no justification for continuing to perpetuate structures, rules, and systems that manifestly fail to serve the interests of all peoples. – Universal House of Justice, March 1, 2017

So many well-intended experts have tried to improve the system, but human-made solutions have not resulted in any improvements and instead have made it worse. As the Baha'i writings tell us:

Economic plans of reconstruction have been carefully devised, and meticulously executed. And yet crisis has succeeded crisis, and the rapidity with which a perilously unstable world is declining has been correspondingly accelerated. A yawning gulf threatens to involve in one common disaster both the satisfied and dissatisfied nations, democracies and dictatorships, capitalists and wage-earners, Europeans and Asiatics, Jew and Gentile, white and coloured. – Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'llah*

The reason for this failure is that our economic system needs fundamental changes. It requires a moral and spiritual overhaul.

… religion alone can, in the last resort, bring in man's nature such a fundamental change as to enable him to adjust the economic relationships of society. It is only in this way that man can control the economic forces that threaten to disrupt the foundations of his existence, and thus assert his mastery over the forces of nature. – Shoghi Effendi, 26 December 1935, letter to an individual believer.

I believe that humanity has reached a high level of maturity, and it is my hope that it won't take crises and disasters to inspire us to find a better way of organizing our affairs — including economics.

9 Practical Economic Tips for Everyday Moral Living

The whole world faces an economic crisis, the likes of which we've never dealt with before – the great disparity between enormous wealth and grinding poverty keeps getting wider and wider.

In Paris more than a hundred years ago, Abdu'l-Baha, the son of Baha'u'llah, the prophet and founder of the Baha'i Faith, put it this way:

The government of the countries should conform to the Divine Law which gives equal justice to all. This is the only way in which the deplorable superfluity of great wealth and miserable, demoralizing, degrading poverty can be abolished. Not until this is done will the Law of God be obeyed. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, p. 154.

Economic crisis, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, grave economic injustice and many more problems that have baffled the experts have forced us to re-examine the entire system and make fundamental changes – before it collapses as it nearly did in 2008. This recent news headline summarizes the economic problems facing humanity: "A CEO from one of the world's top five global fashion brands has to work for just four days to earn what a garment worker in Bangladesh will earn in an entire lifetime."

The economic problems started when Adam Smith, the father of modern economics, wrote *The Wealth of Nations*. That book became like holy scripture for many economists. Smith described economics as the science of creating wealth – but excluded morality and spirituality in his theories. He made self-interest the engine of every economic system.

According to Adam Smith, everybody naturally tries to maximize his or her satisfaction. That selfish philosophy became the breeding ground for greed, which has precipitated the causes of so many world economic problems.

However, many of Adam Smith's followers fail to consider that Smith was the first to acknowledge the economic importance of morality in his earlier book *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, written in 1759, seven years before he wrote *The Wealth of Nations*.

In his earlier book, Smith recognized the inherent danger of wealth, even as he provided ideas for generating it:

This disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and powerful, and to despise or, at least, neglect persons of poor and mean conditions, though necessary both to establish and to maintain the distinction of ranks and the order of society, is, at the same time, the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments. – Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, p. 3.

The Baha'i teachings express a similar point of view, saying that one of the primary principles of Baha'u'llah:

… is the readjustment and equalization of the economic standards of mankind. This deals with the question of human livelihood. It is evident that under present systems and conditions of government the poor are subject to the greatest need and distress while others more fortunate live in luxury and plenty far beyond their actual necessities. This inequality of portion and privilege is one of the deep and vital problems of human society. That there is need of an equalization and apportionment by which all may possess the comforts and privileges of life is evident. The remedy must be legislative readjustment of conditions. The rich too must be merciful to the poor, contributing from willing hearts to their needs without being forced or compelled to do so. The composure of the world will be assured by the establishment of this principle in the religious life of mankind. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 107.

This concept of economics, fundamentally different from the Darwinian idea of the survival of the fittest, is based on spiritual and moral principles. Abdu'l-Baha explained it clearly:

The secrets of the whole economic question are Divine in nature, and are concerned with the world of the heart and spirit. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Baha'i World*, Volume IV, p. 448.

The Baha'i Faith supports the process of the spiritualization of the economic system by injecting moral and spiritual values. Economics is made for humanity and reflects humanity's true aspirations – practical, ethical, moral, and spiritual.

To assess our progress, we have to combine both the spiritual and material civilizations. These two aspects of human development must go hand in hand, the Baha'i teachings say, and complement each other rather than denying each other:

Material civilization has reached an advanced plane, but now there is a need for spiritual civilization. Material civilization alone will not satisfy; it cannot meet the conditions and requirements of the present age; its benefits are limited to the world of matter. There is no limitation to man's spirit, for spirit in itself is progressive, and if the divine civilization be established, the spirit of man will advance. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 101.

The world desperately needs change in all of its outdated systems. The Baha'i teachings call for that change to come about through a spiritual reformation first, a reawakening of humanity's souls.

We may think that we cannot do anything about the emergence of this new, more spiritual economic system, but that's not true. By introducing moral and spiritual values in our everyday economic activities, we can each start making changes in ourselves that will affect others. Those changes and economic actions, guided by a deep sense of morality and service to all humanity, will help build the foundation of a just and unified world commonwealth for the future.

A whole host of practical economic suggestions can empower all of us to act and realize the incredible opportunity we each have to transform society. These nine recommendations can help spiritualize our economic lives:

1. Focus on the crucial questions of life, such as "Who am I?" "What is the purpose of my life?" and "How much is enough?"

2. Commit to living a simple life, a life free of excess consumption and materialism

3. Be honest in all your dealings

4. If you run a business, be content with a reasonable margin of profit

5. Spiritually justify every expenditure by asking yourself, "Is this necessary? Is it good for me, my family, and the entire human family?

6. Make your economic decisions with the intent of protecting the Earth's environment

7. In the spirit of service to others, volunteer whenever possible to help those with fewer economic resources and give to worthy charitable organizations

8. Adopt reasonable financial goals in life by avoiding debt, habitually saving and making your spiritual well-being independent of your material success

9. Finally, in all your dealings with others, create a consciousness that your welfare, well-being and happiness depend on the well-being, prosperity and happiness of every poor, needy and disadvantaged person in the world.

When you implement these nine economic and spiritual steps in your life, you'll be following Abdu'l-Baha's trenchant advice: **"Content thyself with but little of this world's goods! Verily, economy is a great treasure."** – Baha'i World Faith, p. 374.

Delayed Gratification and the Next Life

Life has gradually taught me the benefits and the joy of delaying my gratification. Why put off enjoying the immediate rewards for my efforts? Allow me to explain.

Delayed gratification didn't come naturally to me—I had to learn it by trial and error. Suppose you're not familiar with the concept. In that case, delayed gratification refers to the ability to put off something mildly fun or pleasurable now to gain something even more fun, pleasurable, or rewarding later. For example, you could relax and watch TV the night before an exam or practice delayed gratification and study for the exam—waiting to relax only after the exam is over. Some say the discipline of delayed gratification creates true success in life:

The ability to discipline yourself to delay gratification in the short term in order to enjoy greater rewards in the long term, is the indispensable prerequisite for success. – Brian Tracy

Everyone wants to enjoy the rewards of their efforts, and there is nothing wrong with that. The problem arises when we want instant gratification, rewarding ourselves right after half of the work is done and often before the job is finished. In extreme cases, one rewards oneself even before the work begins!

This kind of instant gratification indicates a lack of self-discipline and self-control, an absence of purpose in one's life and the inability to set goals and see them through. It also sets up a self-defeating pattern: if we reward ourselves before finishing a task, we train ourselves not to finish.

Those who practice delayed gratification demonstrate a well-defined purpose in life and the need to accomplish worthwhile goals. Delayed gratification means accepting the awareness of life's journey as a long one and planning for it.

So, as I was thinking about how much I enjoy my quality time after doing everything on my to-do list for the day, I had an "a-ha!" moment: I realized that our lives, with all their complications, present us with a massive exercise in delayed gratification.

Our comfort and progress in the next world depend on sacrificing many human desires. To progress spiritually, we must value our own will less than the will of our Creator. That way, we can enjoy our journey, fully aware that we've delayed receiving the rewards of this physical world for the next one.

This process, in my estimation, represents the greatest delayed gratification one can imagine. The spiritual reward for preparing for the next life and not settling for the material world's distractions serves as an excellent example of delayed gratification. The spiritual gratification in the next world, the Baha'i teachings tell us, goes far beyond our human comprehension:

… a religious individual must disregard his personal desires and seek in whatever way he can wholeheartedly to serve the public interest; and it is impossible for a human being to turn aside from his own selfish advantages and sacrifice his own good for the good of the community except through true religious faith. For self-love is kneaded into the very clay of man, and it is not possible that, without any hope of a substantial reward, he should neglect his own present material good. That individual, however, who puts his faith in God and believes in the words of God—because he is promised and certain of a plentiful reward in the next life, and because worldly benefits as compared to the abiding joy and glory of future planes of existence are nothing to him—will for the sake of God abandon his own peace and profit and will freely consecrate his heart and soul to the common good. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Secret of Divine Civilization,* pp. 96-97.

The Baha'i teachings give us a constant reminder about the transitory of this world and focus our thoughts and actions towards preparation for the next world:

Therefore in this world, he must prepare himself for life beyond. That which he needs in the world of the Kingdom must be obtained here. Just as he prepared himself in the world of the matrix by acquiring forces necessary in this sphere of existence, so likewise the indispensable forces of the divine existence must be potentially attained in this world. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 226.

In this material world, we spend our lives doing things, hoping for the rewards they will generate. We sacrifice mental and physical energy to earn money so that we can acquire the things we need and want. Some of us spend it without much thought for the future. Only a small percentage of people save money to accumulate until the time when they can exchange it for the things they desire the most.

Saving money means delayed gratification. If we do not spend money now and save it to enjoy it later when we need it more, we practice delayed gratification. In the same way, no reward or gratification is greater than entering the next world with a clear conscience, knowing that spiritually we have exerted spiritual energy and selfless service to humanity, which will sustain us in the worlds to come:

Know thou that the Kingdom is the real world, and this nether place is only its shadow stretching out. A shadow hath no life of its own; its existence is only a fantasy, and nothing more; it is but images reflected in water, and seeming as pictures to the eye. -Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha,* p.178.

From the moment we are born, our bodies begin the journey toward the end of their existence. We all leave this physical world and enter the spiritual one sooner or later, hopefully realizing that this world was merely a short stopover in the long journey of our soul—which will eventually attain the presence of our Creator. When we forget that ultimate goal, we need reminders:

Just as he advances by progressive stages from the mere physical world of being into the intellectual realm, so must he develop upward in moral attributes and spiritual graces. In the process of this attainment he is ever in need of the bestowals of the Holy Spirit. … As the babe is born into the light of this physical world, so must the physical and intellectual man be born into the light of the world of Divinity. In the matrix of the mother the unborn child was deprived and unconscious of the world of material existence, but after its birth it beheld the wonders and beauties of a new realm of life and being. In the world of the matrix it was utterly ignorant and unable to conceive of these new conditions, but after its transformation it discovers the radiant sun, trees, flowers and an infinite range of blessings and bounties awaiting it. In the human plane and kingdom man is a captive of nature and ignorant of the divine world until born of the breaths of the Holy Spirit out of physical conditions of limitation and deprivation. Then he beholds the reality of the spiritual realm and Kingdom, realizes the narrow restrictions of the mere human world of existence and becomes conscious of the unlimited and infinite glories of the world of God. Therefore, no matter how man may advance upon the physical and intellectual plane, he is ever in need of the boundless virtues of Divinity, the protection of the Holy Spirit and the face of God. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 288-289.

Understanding Each Other in these Confusing Times

In our world today, an air of confusion and irritation manifests itself differently in different people.

Baha'is believe that the world is in the process of giving birth to a wonderful new world order that brings a great future. What we are experiencing now is the pain before its birth. In a sense, we are the midwives responsible for preparing and assisting with the birth:

We stand on the threshold of an age whose convulsions proclaim alike the death-pangs of the old order and the birth-pangs of the new. Through the generating influence of the Faith announced by Baha'u'llah this New World Order may be said to have been conceived. We can, at the present moment, experience its stirrings in the womb of a travailing age—an age waiting for the appointed hour at which it can cast its burden and yield its fairest fruit.

The whole earth," writes Baha'u'llah, "is now in a state of pregnancy. The day is approaching when it will have yielded its noblest fruits, when from it will have sprung forth the loftiest trees, the most enchanting blossoms, the most heavenly blessings. Immeasurably exalted is the breeze that wafteth from the garment of thy Lord, the Glorified! For lo, it hath breathed its fragrance and made all things new! Well is it with them that comprehend. – Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'llah*, p. 168.

We all react to this pregnancy period in different ways. Still, I'll let you decide where you belong and suggest the course of action Baha'is are taking to survive this period of changes and transformation in the history of humanity.

One extreme is those who show no sign of being affected by these rapid changes and confusion but quietly and with great courage do their best to better the world. Some of them are affiliated with religious beliefs, yet some are believers in science. They have realized their mission in life and do their best without fighting or hating those who take opposing views. They know how to see common ground between people, not differences. They know what they are doing will bear fruit in the future. The Baha'i teachings describe them like this:

Lift up your hearts above the present and look with eyes of faith into the future! Today the seed is sown, the grain falls upon the earth, but behold the day will come when it shall raise a glorious tree and the branches thereof shall be laden with fruit. Rejoice and be glad that this day has dawned, try to realise its power, for it is indeed wonderful! God has crowned you with honour and in your hearts has He set a radiant star; verily the light thereof shall brighten the whole world! – Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, p. 69

The other extreme? Those who thrive on confusion seek only their own self-interest and do whatever they can to get what they want. Since people like this think the end justifies the means, they do not consider the morality of their actions—but they lie, destroy, hate and even kill anything opposed to their version of the truth. Many of them are followers of different so-called religious groups—even though no real religion supports violence—or various radical ideologies. They function as the leading causes of the destruction of the old order, ultimately contributing to change.

Some cannot understand what is happening around them and feel helpless in figuring out a course of action. They often give up, and their efforts are limited to complaining and reminding everyone how hopeless the present time is and how they missed the good old days when everything was good and decent. They have forgotten their most important duty as citizens of the world: **"All men have been created to carry forward an ever-advancing civilization."** – Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 214.

That last group of people, who could be you or me, have sincere motives and good intentions. They want to contribute to building a just society—to defend the poor, save the planet from pollution, and bring about a better health care system, a better system of education, a better government system, and better economic policies. They have many other wonderful goals, as well. But instead of changing things for the better, they end up not knowing what to do.

We have a moral obligation to reach out to all these groups and lovingly help them see the possibilities of creating a new world order. Those who already expend their energy selflessly building a better world need our encouragement and support for their sacrificial work. Those confused about what to do also need our help to remove the dark clouds hanging over their lives. Those good-hearted yet frustrated souls need to be reminded that their anger and impatience are self-defeating so they do not end up frustrated and hating others. Those on the path of destruction are the most difficult to help, and yet we can always pray for them and make sure that their actions and words do not create feelings of hate in our hearts:

… The world is like the body of man—it hath become sick, feeble and infirm. Its eye is devoid of sight, its ear hath become destitute of hearing and its faculties of sense are entirely dissolved. The friends of God must become as wise physicians and care for and heal this sick person, in accord with the divine teachings, in order that—God willing—it may perchance gain health, find eternal healing and that its lost powers may be restored; and that the person of the world may find such health, freshness and purity that it will appear in the utmost beauty and charm. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Baha'i World Faith*, p. 356.

Baha'is believe that we should be like physicians for humanity's healing—physicians who recognize the symptoms and then prescribe the correct medicine. That medicine, the Baha'i teachings say, is embodied in the cause, the principles and the spiritual remedies brought by Baha'u'llah.

We Live in an Age of Miracles

We live in an age of miracles—and we don't even know it.

I've often wished I lived in the times of some of my heroes who participated in great historical events and fought beside them in their battles. How I admired and idealized them. I would have wanted to be with them and help them in any way I could see in their battles with ignorance and injustice, and by doing that, I would have taken part in an important event in human history.

We all have some heroes from the past that we admire. As a Baha'i, I've wanted to live in the earliest days of my Faith's dramatic history with those great men and women who risked everything, including their lives, for their deepest beliefs. They were tormented and put in the worst prisons to persuade them to recant their Faith, but that made them more determined and braver. Most of them suffered and died for their beliefs. Those stories of bravery inspire me.

Recently, though, I've become more focused on what is happening now. The news concentrates on the negative events, but I try to see our present day's positive side. As I continue doing that, I realize our modern-day world's wonders are totally overlooked because of the negative slant prevalent in much of the news.

I found it fascinating as I searched more and observed with an investigating eye. I am from the generation that did not grow up with the many amazing gadgets that are so commonplace today, so I see them not with a jaded eye but with a sense of wonderment. I don't take them for granted, so you can imagine why I call the present time an age of miracles.

These days—promised by religions and people of vision in the past—are truly miraculous. When Abdu'l-Baha, the son and successor of Baha'u'llah, the prophet and founder of the Baha'i Faith, came to North America to speak about and spread the Baha'i ideals more than a century ago, he said:

From every standpoint the world of humanity is undergoing a reformation … scientific ideas and theories are developing and advancing to meet a new range of phenomena; invention and discovery are penetrating hitherto unknown fields, revealing new wonders and hidden secrets of the material universe; industries have vastly wider

scope and production; everywhere the world of mankind is in the throes of evolutionary activity indicating the passing of the old conditions and advent of the new age of reformation. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 439.

After thinking about it, I realized how my heroes would have loved to experience the present, not just because of new inventions and discoveries, but rather to see how much closer we are to the promised day when humanity becomes united and establishes a new world commonwealth.

It may sound too optimistic to write about these things at a time when it looks as if the world is falling apart when numerous wars and conflicts rage—but Baha'is believe these events, both positive and negative, are all part of a bigger plan:

The world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this greatest, this new World Order. Mankind's ordered life hath been revolutionized through the agency of this unique, this wondrous System—the like of which mortal eyes have never witnessed. – Baha'u'llah, *The Most Holy Book*, p. 85.

Look at it this way: to build your dream house, you must dismantle the old and start building a new, well-designed, beautiful structure. Similarly, the Baha'i teachings say that the old order—with its failing theories, systems, and structures in the economic, political, education, health and other realms—cannot satisfy the needs of the present generation of humanity. All of these upheavals are the signs of its malfunctioning and the sounds of its destruction. This doesn't signal the end of the world but signifies the coming of a beautiful new world. The Baha'i teachings say we are on the edge of these profound changes. Most people now agree that things are not working today and don't require convincing that we need a better system.

Now, with the Baha'i teachings pointing the way toward a more unified, peaceful and loving future civilization, we can devote our energy to laying the foundation:

This commonwealth must, as far as we can visualize it, consist of a world legislature, whose members will, as the trustees of the whole of mankind, ultimately control the entire resources of all the component nations, and will enact such laws as shall be required to regulate the life, satisfy the needs and adjust the relationships of all races and peoples. A world executive, backed by an international Force, will carry out the decisions arrived at, and apply the laws enacted by, this world legislature, and will safeguard the organic unity of the whole commonwealth. A world tribunal will adjudicate and deliver its compulsory and final verdict in all and any disputes that may arise

between the various elements constituting this universal system. A mechanism of world inter-communication will be devised, embracing the whole planet, freed from national hindrances and restrictions, and functioning with marvellous swiftness and perfect regularity. A world metropolis will act as the nerve center of a world civilization, the focus towards which the unifying forces of life will converge and from which its energizing influences will radiate. – Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'llah*, p. 203.

Who from the past generations would not want to witness the advent of a new age? We are witnessing the old structure crumbling down, and a new tool is invented every day. We have the blueprint of the new structure in hand and are preparing our equipment as we eagerly wait to start construction. Thanks to Baha'u'llah's new revelation, we now have the design for that future structure—but first, humanity as a whole needs to join hands to participate in this venture because this new world belongs to every single person on Earth.

Seeing Money Through Spiritual Eyes

As a student of economics and as part of the educational system, I have marvelled at our society's lack of financial knowledge.

As a Baha'i, my Faith puts a great deal of importance on education and always emphasizes both spiritual and material education:

The primary, the most urgent requirement is the promotion of education. It is inconceivable that any nation should achieve prosperity and success unless this paramount, this fundamental concern is carried forward. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 110.

Progress is of two kinds, material and spiritual. The former is attained through observation of the surrounding existence and constitutes the foundation of civilization. Spiritual progress is through the breaths of the Holy Spirit and is the awakening of the conscious soul of man to perceive the reality of divinity. Material progress insures the happiness of the human world. Spiritual progress insures the happiness and eternal continuance of the soul. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 142.

Education has one primary goal: preparing young students for their adult life. In my experience, though, our educational system usually manages to entirely ignore one of the most critical aspects of their lives—financial literacy. Since "material progress ensures the happiness of the human world," we're failing our students if we leave them uneducated about life's material and monetary aspects.

I am unsure why those who design educational systems do not think managing finances is essential. Whatever the reason, the fact is that many of my ex-students come to me and say, "I was cheated out of years of my life because nobody taught me how to manage my finances."

Students today often leave school with mountains of debt, which can cripple their futures. They don't know how to manage or save, so many spend whatever they earn, and in most cases, spend way beyond their earnings, which can soon lead them to bankruptcy. If they don't leave school with massive indebtedness from student loans, chances are they've run up major credit card debt during high school and college. A recent study in *The*

Journal of Applied Social Psychology concluded that we need to educate students in financial literacy:

The issue of credit card debt among college students has received increasing attention. This study explored factors hypothesized to be causes and effects of credit card debt in 448 students on five college campuses. Students reported an average of $1,035 (*SD*=$1,849) in debt, including students without credit cards or credit card debt. Lack of financial knowledge, age, number of credit cards, delay of gratification, and attitudes toward credit card use were related to debt. … Students reporting greater debt reported greater stress and decreased financial well-being. Results highlight the need for comprehensive financial literacy education among college students.

Our educational system aims at arming students with the tools to make them successful materially—but they rarely teach the real meaning of that success. Yes, business schools teach the concept of competition and eliminating rivals as means of success—but without mentioning the virtues of co-operation.

On a broader scale, much of our higher education follows the old, materialistic notion that having more money is the highest goal of success, without ever mentioning the spiritual or moral side of life. If we began to teach students more about financial and spiritual literacy, they could learn how to turn material wealth into spiritual success:

Wealth is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired by an individual's own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, art and industry, and if it be expended for philanthropic purposes. Above all, if a judicious and resourceful individual should initiate measures which would universally enrich the masses of the people, there could be no undertaking greater than this, and it would rank in the sight of God as the supreme achievement, for such a benefactor would supply the needs and ensure the comfort and well-being of a great multitude. Wealth is most commendable, provided the entire population is wealthy. If, however, a few have inordinate riches while the rest are impoverished, and no fruit o*r* benefit accrues from that wealth, then it is only a liability to its possessor. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, pp. 24-25.

If we teach our students and our children about the basic value of money and how to manage and spend it responsibly, they can learn about the importance of planning for the long run and saving for a rainy day. If we teach our students and children about love for humanity, they can learn about the fact that they can use the money for good causes:

If, on the other hand, it is expended for the promotion of knowledge, the founding of elementary and other schools, the encouragement of art and industry, the training of orphans and the poor—in brief, if it is dedicated to the welfare of society—its possessor will stand out before God and man as the most excellent of all who live on earth and will be accounted as one of the people of paradise. – Ibid., p. 25.

Whatever the reason for this shortfall in financial literacy in our education system or our society, we need to begin making it clear that by our actions, we can set an example for others about how our material possessions can be used for the betterment of humanity. We can face and conquer the cancer of materialism through education and make a lasting contribution to humankind's welfare.

Spirituality: The Surprising Solution to Our Economic Problems

Everyone knows we have bodies—but many aren't so sure about the existence of the soul.

Of course, the body has needs—food, clothing, shelter, health care—and it has traditionally been the job of economics to satisfy those needs.

Consider this: what if the soul and the body are both equally valid realities? Even further, what if the soul lives eternally? If that's true, shouldn't we prioritize the eternal needs of the soul over the body's temporary needs or make them equal in importance?

With these assumptions, the needs of the soul do become a priority. The body's role—to support the soul by living longer in a healthy manner so the soul can achieve more in this lifetime—means we can't ignore our bodies. We need to take care of them because the body supports the soul; it is the soul's temple. This basic assumption, from a Baha'i perspective, needs to underpin all economic systems:

The inordinate disparity between rich and poor, a source of acute suffering, keeps the world in a state of instability, virtually on the brink of war. Few societies have dealt effectively with this situation. The solution calls for the combined application of spiritual, moral and practical approaches. A fresh look at the problem is required, entailing consultation with experts from a wide spectrum of disciplines, devoid of economic and ideological polemics, and involving the people directly affected in the decisions that must urgently be made. It is an issue that is bound up not only with the necessity for eliminating extremes of wealth and poverty but also with those spiritual verities the understanding of which can produce a new universal attitude. Fostering such an attitude is itself a major part of the solution. – The Universal House of Justice, *The Promise of World Peace*, pp. 10-11.

Adam Smith, considered the father of modern economics, also made some basic assumptions to provide more goods for man's needs. Based on his observations, Smith built his theoretical economic system. One of the assumptions he made was that man always acts in his own interests and

wants to maximize his satisfaction, so he believed that unfettered self-interest in free-market economies leads to economic prosperity.

In his famous book The Wealth of Nations, Smith mentioned the other assumptions, including the use of the term “invisible hand,” as a metaphor to describe the self-regulation of capitalist markets. He also advocated “laissez-faire economics,” which meant that governments should not interfere and economic markets should be left alone to take care of any problems. He expounded upon how rational self-interest and competition can lead to economic prosperity.

Other economists adopted these two fundamental principles of the economic system introduced by Adam Smith. The focus on maximizing satisfaction created a sense of individualism and praise and was a source of inspiration for many. However, without any interference from governments or other agencies, this economic thought trend created a breeding ground for greed and exploitation. It resulted in societies that lacked empathy and ignored the plight of the poor and needy. In those societies, the spirit of giving and sharing waned, and gradually, the gap between the rich and poor grew greater. Accumulating wealth became considered the highest achievement in a person’s life. Becoming rich became the goal of every man, and the cost of achieving this goal was not questioned.

But if the body and its needs become a barrier or hindrance to the soul's progress, then there is a serious problem. These days, in humanity's economic life, the body and its wants have taken over the soul's needs and desires. The servant has become the master, and precious human lives are being wasted in the pursuit of the body's desires. The Baha’i teachings explain:

The soul of man is the sun by which his body is illumined, and from which it draweth its sustenance, and should be so regarded. – Baha’u’llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha’u’llah*, p. 155.

Because we’ve prioritized the body's needs over the needs of the soul, the world's economic situation has spun out of control. Because of the great economic disparities this over-emphasis on the body has caused, we have to admit that only spirituality can deal with the worldwide spread of this disease of greed and self-centeredness. Because of the massive suffering of the poor, we have to find ways to bring a new sense of justice to the world.

To do all that, we need to take a few steps back and define the purpose and the nature of economics and then try to find remedies for its problems:

The secrets of the whole economic question are Divine in nature, and are concerned with the world of the heart and spirit. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Baha'i World*, Volume IV, p. 448.

In the past, we've looked in the wrong direction to solve the world's economic problems. However, as the economic situation gets worse and more desperate for so many people worldwide, we can start to consider spiritual and moral solutions to our civilization's economic problems. The soul knows, and it can guide us to build a new economic system that can accommodate all aspects of human life—for all humans. The Baha'i teachings say:

Through the power of the rational soul, man can discover the realities of things, comprehend their properties, and penetrate the mysteries of existence. All the sciences, branches of learning, arts, inventions, institutions, undertakings, and discoveries have resulted from the comprehension of the rational soul. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, newly revised edition, p. 219.

Where do we start? Maybe by accepting the fact that there is more to humanity than our physical needs and that our spiritual needs have to be recognized and become the focal point of our attention. By recognizing our inner spiritual needs and combining them with physical needs, we will have the impetus and the insight to create a balanced economic system that covers all aspects of our lives and allows us to attain our souls' desires.

The history of economics has shown us that a system without spiritual guidance can lose its effectiveness and eventually become oppressive and cruel. The Baha'i teachings provide the guidance the world needs to remedy the injustices done to society's poor and underprivileged people. We can resolve those injustices by implementing spiritual solutions to our economic problems.

God, Please Put it on My Account

Sometimes, we're very hard on ourselves and can't forgive our mistakes in certain areas of life. Many of us lack self-esteem and consequently lose sight of life's big picture.

When that happens to me, I often forget that life represents a collection of my good and bad actions—sort of a balance sheet that keeps track of my good and bad deeds. The negative side or the bad deeds are like an open account at a store or with a credit card company that keeps track of my purchases and payments. The expectation? Payments must be made by the end of the week or month at the most.

Our life's open account is no different—because we are spiritually brought to account by the end of our physical existence. So when we know this tab is open and understand that we will make many mistakes till we die, why do we suddenly pick one mistake and become obsessed with it to the extent that we cannot forgive ourselves? Why one when many could be singled out and made to be the stumbling block on the way of our human journey?

Forgiving others for what they have done is much easier for me than forgiving myself. The Baha'i teachings have a wealth of insight and knowledge to help us forgive others—and ourselves. But my problem has always been being unable to forgive myself. For whatever reason, my self-esteem has rarely been high enough to take me to the happier side of self-forgiveness. Even after finding out some great people too felt like me, not feeling worthy did not help me with my struggles. But when I read the holy scripture of many different Faiths, they take away some of the pain.

Even the great apostle Paul looked at his past with great regret: "For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God." – 1 Corinthians 15:9.

Maybe we need to be reminded that our account with the Creator remains open and that we should not let one mistake stop us from moving on with our lives. He has not given up on us, so why are we writing ourselves off? We will eventually balance our account.

As a result of doing so many wrong things in my life, I sometimes feel unbearable and paralyzed, filled with deep regret. This negativity reaches so high that I have to find ways not to deal with it, postponing that intense and

difficult reckoning to some future time so that hopefully, I am better equipped to face it and deal with it by then. So when those intense guilt attack moments occur, I repeat this to myself: “Please God, put it on my tab.”

That way, I buy myself some time to deal with it later—to pray, silently ask God for forgiveness, and find the inner strength to resolve to be a better and more spiritual soul.

By using this method, I have survived many moments of utter despair. It also proved to me that God’s account with us is very flexible. He is kind because he sees our weaknesses and gives us opportunities to try again. Were it not for His flexibility, we would have had to give up trying.

The Baha’i teachings say that the coming of Baha’u’llah can wash our consciences clean if we let it:

Now hath the Truth appeared, and falsehood fled away; now hath the day dawned and jubilation taken over, wherefore men’s souls are sanctified, their spirits purged, their hearts rejoiced, their minds purified, their secret thoughts made wholesome, their consciences washed clean, their inmost selves made holy: for the Day of Resurrection hath come to pass, and the bestowals of thy Lord, the Forgiving, have encompassed all things. – Abdu’l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu’l-Baha*, p. 38.

Later in life, I finally resolved this inner problem when I made a pilgrimage trip to the Holy Land's Baha’i World Centre. There, I met a very wise Baha’i who noticed my troubles when I could not find myself worthy enough to go to the Baha’i Shrines. This wise person asked me if I believed God was forgiving, and I said yes. He said do you think he has forgiven you for the bad things you have done? I said I am sure He has. Then he looked at me with a look of disappointment and said, “Then who the hell do you think you are? Are you higher than God? Forgive yourself! He has!”

At that moment, my spiritual eye opened for the first time, and I could clearly see my life.

When we obsessively occupy our minds and souls with negative thoughts, we lose sight of the big picture and forget who runs the show. If God has forgiven all your shortcomings, please do yourself a favour and accept it with gratefulness. After all, our lives are God’s gift to us, and He wants us to live wisely, cheerfully and free from guilt and regrets.

The Baha'i Concept of a "Good Loan"

As an economist, I get this question fairly often: What's a fair rate of interest?

The rate of interest is an essential concept in the economic field. Sadly, it has become more of a method of exploitation than a means of help—particularly to those who struggle to survive in a materialistic world.

Student loans are a good example. Some student loans charge outrageous rates of interest, putting poor students in tremendous debt. For example, the average student loan debt in the United States is $20,000 per student. Paying those debts off can mean returning more than twice that amount to predatory lending companies.

However, the world's whole economic and banking system relies on interest to operate, so the question is: what is its origin, and why has it become such a dominant factor in the economic system?

Governments, banks, pawnshops, and money marts all charge a rate of interest. Some of those rates are so high that they are immoral and should be illegal. Interest has become one of the means of enslaving people. In some rural areas of our planet, it is still being used to control others' lives and force work out of them instead of paying wages. Even though we live in industrialized countries, those of us who have had to deal with student loans or personal loans often feel a sense of entrapment. Interest can be a weapon with amazingly destructive powers in terms of control. But it can also be an angel of mercy to help the poor.

Governments use interest in their loans to other countries—generally the underdeveloped countries—to help them build infrastructure, support their military and feed their people. History is full of examples of how developing countries were exploited with these loans and how the governments of wealthy debtor nations took advantage of the situation to force decisions in their favour and for their own benefit. These loans were used as extortion, and rather than freeing developing nations economically, their high-interest loans kept them in bondage. If you think this was only done in the past, you may be surprised to know how prevalent this practice still is today.

In most developed countries, the interest rate is regulated by law—but in places where there is no regulation or supervision, private banks have charged huge, usurious interest rates.

Unregulated money lenders have had no mercy on people and often prey on the poor. In the absence of any regulation, they have charged as high a rate of interest as benefited them. Lenders like pawnshops and "payday lenders" often make their money from the poorest and uneducated society segments. They are fully aware of the vulnerability of the people who come to them in times of great need when there is no other option for help—and some pawnshops see their misfortune as an opportunity to make a great amount of money from the poorest of the poor.

All of these predatory practices produce a profit at any cost without any other consideration. The bottom line is making money, and it does not matter who is hurt or destroyed. There is no consideration or room for morality in these actions.

What has religion done about these practices? It should come as no surprise that the Jewish Faith, Islam and Christianity did not encourage the practice of charging interest. Christ famously drove the moneylenders from the temple. Sadly, though, each of these religions' followers eventually ignored the moral and spiritual principles and began to charge interest to their fellow believers.

The Baha'i teachings allow the practice of charging interest, but they apply certain conditions that must be considered. The most important condition is that it should be a "good loan:"

One can seldom find a person who would manifest such consideration towards his fellow-man, his countryman or towards his own brother and would show such tender solicitude for him as to be well-disposed to grant him a loan on benevolent terms … [Such loans as bear no interest and are repayable whenever the borrower pleases]. – Baha'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, pp. 132-133.

Baha'u'llah wrote that charging interest was lawful but said:

However, this is a matter that should be practised with moderation and fairness … We exhort the loved ones of God to observe justice and fairness, and to do that which would prompt the friends of God to evince tender mercy and compassion towards each other. – Ibid., p. 133.

The Baha'i teachings recognize that a high interest rate on any loan is unfair because it puts a heavy burden on the individual or the nation's economic life, which, in turn, diminishes the quality of life.

Baha'u'llah emphasized the concept of a good loan, meaning that the interest rate had to be such that it did not unduly burden the borrower and benefited everyone. With a good loan, the person or firm lending the money gets an adequate amount of interest, and the person borrowing is happy because he can afford to pay it.

A good loan charges a fair, moderate and reasonable rate of interest, using the Baha'i principles of kindness and moderation to help our fellow human beings prosper materially and enjoy the necessities of life—and to put an end to extreme financial hardship for individuals and countries. We should decide the rate of interest by sympathy for others and not greed.

Becoming a Mystical Economist

Have you ever heard of a mystical economist? It seems strange to see these two words side by side since they represent two entirely different universes.

Can they be combined? Are they really the opposite? Can we have both? The gap between the two seems so great.

Mysticism symbolizes our lives higher or spiritual aspects—detachment from the material world and anything that would distract from attaining the Beloved presence's goal. Mystics believe that if we want to attain spirituality, then what we need in our lives is more of Rumi, Kahlil Gibran, the great poets and inspiring philosophers, and less of Adam Smith, Karl Marx and other economists. Mystics have more interest in traversing the Seven Valleys in our spiritual journey and less computing data to navigate our economic lives.

Life's journey is short, and every moment is very precious, so the question becomes: why spend more time on the material side of our lives rather than the spiritual side? After all, we cannot take our material possessions with us to the next world.

A mystic sees death in living and living in death. He sees the beginning in the end and the end in the beginning. He has learned through experience in life that everything in this world is transitory, like a mirage. The compass of his soul is directed straight towards the Beloved, and nothing can distract him from reaching his heart’s desire. Jewels and gold are like the twinkling of the stars and nothing more. They just sparkle and have no use for him on his journey. His soul wants him to spend his time and energies to serve his fellow human beings. It wants him to give praise and gratitude to his Beloved and be lost in His love.

Economists and the field of economics represent what the world has to offer for the sustenance, pleasure and comfort of the body and the senses. Economics reminds us that no one has seen the next world, so why not be happy and enjoy everything the material world has to offer to earn more money so that we can afford to acquire all the luxuries and comforts: the best house, the best cars, and eating the best food. We can have the latest and the best the world can offer to us; after all, the whole world, with all its splendours, was created for us. Why not enjoy the glitter of jewels and gold,

the comforts, the pleasures that all one's senses can enjoy? The economist in us wants to master the art of accumulating wealth.

The Baha'i teachings, and the teachings of every great Faith, remind us about the danger in possessing and acquiring wealth:

It is easier for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. – Matthew 19:24, Mark 10:25, and Luke 18:25

… wealth is a mighty barrier between the seeker and his desire, the lover and his beloved. – Baha'u'llah, *The Hidden Words*, p. 41.

Here's a thought: although it may be difficult, spiritual beings do not need to avoid the world for fear of being drowned in materialism:

To view the worth of an individual chiefly in terms of how much one can accumulate and how many goods one can consume relative to others is wholly alien to Baha'i thought. But neither are the teachings in sympathy with sweeping dismissals of wealth as inherently distasteful or immoral, and asceticism is prohibited. Wealth must serve humanity. – The Universal House of Justice, 1 March 2017.

The Baha'i teachings remind us, as individuals or as a civilization, that we need a balance between mysticism and economics:

Material civilization is like unto the lamp, while spiritual civilization is the light in that lamp. If the material and spiritual civilization become united, then we will have the light and the lamp together, and the outcome will be perfect. For material civilization is like unto a beautiful body, and spiritual civilization is like unto the spirit of life. If that wondrous spirit of life enters this beautiful body, the body will become a channel for the distribution and development of the perfections of humanity. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 12.

The history of the separation of these two throughout the ages does not mean that the future has to follow the same way.

We have come a long way—but we have to start a new way of life that allows us to use both of these gifts for the advancement of ourselves and our society. As we grasp the spiritual implications of combining the two kinds of insight and wisdom, we will build the capacity to handle both the material and the spiritual. We will learn and educate ourselves through the tests that money can bring and prepare ourselves to avoid unknown factors that can hamper our goal of combining them. We will develop a vision that gives us the ability to see the two as one.

Both of these wonderful tools can help us grow and develop spiritually and materially. The man or woman of the future does not have to escape from the material world. Awareness of the reality and purpose of spirituality in the material world will allow humanity to utilize material possessions to benefit our collective spiritual journey. There should not be a conflict between the material side and the spiritual side of our lives—they both have their place and their importance:

We must care for man's two natures; for as the material man makes certain demands for food and raiment and if not looked after suffers, even so his spiritual reality suffers without care. This is why the divine messengers come to the rescue—to care for the reality, that man's thoughts may unfold and his aims become realized, that he many inherit a new field of progress, for the spiritual side should be cared for as much as the corporeal; the help that comes is through the resuscitating breath of the Holy Spirit. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Divine Philosophy*, p. 96.

The new race of man will see God in everything, including money and possessions, so that he can give freely for the betterment of the world.

Finding the Right Home for the Seniors in Our Lives

As I get older, I am more mindful of the end of my physical life. There are so many things that I am grateful for: I do not worry about work and money, and I live the retired life of my dreams. No matter how comfortable and content I am, I am also aware of the eventual fading of my bodily powers and my effectiveness and that I will be looked upon as someone who needs to be taken care of and in need of help.

For a long time, I have thought of elders in the senior homes, who, even though they are still capable, is just passing the time before their next journey comes.

I believe that the integration of elders has to be each community's goal since the treasures of the elders' experience and wisdom will serve the young generation who need it so desperately. That is why I want to build a home for the elders and try to make it a place where integration and collaboration between different age groups become commonplace rather than merely a dream.

Growing up in the Middle East and living in Iran, India, and China, I was exposed to different cultures and witnessed how the elders were viewed and treated. They were looked upon with respect and reverence. As children, we were taught how to behave in the elders' presence because that was a sign of the proper upbringing of the children. I am surprised to see the West's approach towards our elders. Even in North America, except Native American culture, elders are often seen as a burden on social programs.

Our culture — especially social media — gives the impression that the world revolves around young people. Hollywood reinforces an unspoken reality that the world is the playground for the young. It is so hard to imagine a productive place for the elders in modern society. It often seems like every movie, television show, and commercial caters to the young. Frankly, it feels like the only thing left for older people to do these days is to take their medicine and wait for their turn to die.

This is such a contrast to my awareness as a Baha'i that our souls never age. The body's condition should not distract us from nurturing the soul, no matter how old we are. Our elders have been separated from society to efficiently take care of their physical needs, and their spiritual and human needs have been overlooked.

Baha'u'llah, the prophet and founder of the Baha'i Faith, wrote:

"Know thou that the soul of man is exalted above, and is independent of all infirmities of body or mind. That a sick person showeth signs of weakness is due to the hindrances that interpose themselves between his soul and his body, for the soul itself remaineth unaffected by any bodily ailments."

We should approach older people as spiritual beings and ignore their physical frailties. There is so much that can be accomplished through our elders' resources and wisdom — if only society could begin to see them in the right light. Rather than allowing them to waste away in sanitized homes where dreams die faster than bodies, we should provide them with the means to achieve goals they may have set for their golden years.

In 1982, at the first United Nations World Assembly on Ageing, the Baha'i International Community, an international non-governmental organization representing the members of the Baha'i Faith at the UN, offered some suggestions that I recently came across. They wrote:

"That there must be full integration of the aging in the human community, since the community should be an extended family in which everyone, of any age, is an essential part, and not only allowed, but encouraged, to make the fullest possible contribution to the wellbeing of the whole; and that in considering the needs of the aging in the process of development we must take into account the wholeness of the human being, the moral and spiritual dimension, besides his emotional, intellectual, and physical nature when discussing the special contributions of older persons to development and their sharing in the resulting benefits."

In recent years, the cancer of materialism has eroded some of the old traditions of respect and care for the elders, but not entirely. My visit to India was proof. Before I visited, I had never considered building a home for the elders there because I thought that the rich Indian culture, with its deep roots in tradition, would reinforce the idea of taking care of elders. I was shocked to be informed by friends that this was not the case anymore. Also, adding to the elders' sad plight was that there were insufficient funds to help from the government.

I can picture myself in a home with limited interaction with the outside world. No matter how physically comfortable I would be, my soul would be starving for other generations' companionship. I have spent a lifetime of learning, travelling to different places, and doing amazing things in my life. I've gained so much experience that I would love to share, and I have many stories to tell.

My dream, which is based on the goal of full integration, is a home where there will be classes for children, youth activities, art classes, and visitors coming from near and far to see the vegetable garden and flowers that the elders have helped grow. I see each elder spiritually adopted by a family who takes care of them and includes them as members of their families. I see a home of creative activities where classes are taught by the young and the elders according to their interests. Yes, it is a dream, but it is a sweet dream that is worth our energy and resources. After all, without dreams, so many of humanity's achievements would not have happened.

We must consider integrating elders into day-to-day life not just for the sake of respect and love for them but because, in no time, we each will be an elder experiencing loneliness and isolation. We have to change our mindset to see the elders as a source of untapped wisdom and knowledge. For the benefit of society, we can create an environment of comfort with an emphasis on integration so that before their final flight, none of their dreams are unfulfilled.

Why the World Needs Meaningful Conversation

When is the last time you had a deep, meaningful conversation with somebody? Wouldn't you like to have more of those?

We sometimes spend hours talking to people without it amounting to anything concrete. Those conversations can build community and friendships, and we need to have them feel we are part of society. Small talk helps us connect with people safely without offending or contradicting them. That is why, in many countries, people talk about the weather, which seems strange and irrelevant to visitors and a waste of time.

As people get used to making meaningless small talk to connect, they're also forced to tolerate and observe hateful, divisive, and hurtful conversations. These harmful conversations are mostly based on the supremacy of one political view, ideology, race, religion, and nationality over others. These subjects and many more have been used to put one set of people down by criticizing them so that they feel good about themselves. Observing these conversations is so painful that I'll take meaningless conversations about the weather at any time.

At present, the art of meaningful conversation is being gradually forgotten and has become a rare commodity. Humanity seems to be losing its way of communicating with each other and is choosing confrontation instead. Hurtful words are often used to inflict the most harm to the opposite views. The Baha'i Writings remind us about the importance of being courteous and sensitive in choosing our words while addressing others, especially those whose ideas are different from ours. Baha'u'llah, the prophet and founder of the Baha'i Faith, wrote:

"Every word is endowed with a spirit, therefore the speaker or expounder should carefully deliver his words at the appropriate time and place, for the impression which each word maketh is clearly evident and perceptible. The Great Being saith: One word may be likened unto fire, another unto light, and the influence which both exert is manifest in the world."

Social media, with all its benefits, has given a new dimension to this problem. It provides an avenue for anyone to say whatever comes to their mind under the pretext of "Freedom of Speech." As a result, some people

have replaced logic and common sense with erratic emotional outbursts that achieve nothing except create pain and hate.

This phenomenon's other side effect is when people reject any logical and scientific idea that does not coincide with their views by labelling it “fake.” Though misinformation and propaganda have been part of media since the beginning of newspapers, they have only recently reached their highest peak. It has entered areas of life that were untouched before.

Sometimes, people don’t want to spend their energy investigating the truth, so they outright reject it since there is the danger of learning that they could be proven wrong. So, by calling other points of view “fake,” we escape the chance of learning something new or finding a new way of looking at the issues, and that will lead to a war of words. These warring parties fight a bitter battle of conversations as if they are on the battlefield having one goal: the destruction of the other’s point of view at any cost.

We can’t continue to tread this path of inability. Instead, we need to have a meaningful conversation so that humanity can choose a united way to build the future. The world needs to go back to the basic principles of communication. Learning the art of meaningful conversation and consultation will help us solve the matters that are tearing our society apart. We need to see each other not as enemies but rather as fellow human beings and be forgiving in dealing with one another. Abdu’l-Baha, the son of Baha’u’llah, wrote:

“Be in perfect unity. Never become angry with one another… Love the creatures for the sake of God and not for themselves. You will never become angry or impatient if you love them for the sake of God. Humanity is not perfect. There are imperfections in every human being, and you will always become unhappy if you look toward the people themselves. But if you look toward God, you will love them and be kind to them, for the world of God is the world of perfection and complete mercy

Truth is essential to a just, equitable society. Indeed, Abdu’l-Baha wrote, “**The shining spark of truth cometh forth only after the clash of differing opinions**.”

However, the problem lies when we bring the ego into the conversation. Then, it becomes a clash of egos rather than ideas. That, in turn, leads us to conflict and hatred. Instead, we need to learn the basic principles of consultation. Abdu’l-Baha gave us a few points to keep in mind. He wrote:

… must take counsel together in such wise that no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise. This can be attained when every member

expresseth with absolute freedom his own opinion and setteth forth his argument. Should anyone oppose, he must on no account feel hurt for not until matters are fully discussed can the right way be revealed.

The lack of meaningful conversation and consultation is the absence of moral and spiritual guidelines for proper interactions. Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith, provides us with the fundamentals. He wrote:

They must when coming together turn their faces to the Kingdom on High and ask aid from the Realm of Glory. They must then proceed with the utmost devotion, courtesy, dignity, care and moderation to express their views. They must in every matter search out the truth and not insist upon their own opinion, for stubbornness and persistence in one's views will lead ultimately to discord and wrangling and the truth will remain hidden.

Here is more advice from Baha'u'llah: He wrote that we should speak **"with words as mild as milk"** and **'with utmost leniency and forbearance so that the sweetness of his words may induce everyone to attain that which befitteth man's station."**

Although meaningful conversation looks like a simple statement, its influence and potential are immense. After all, it is the foundation for building a communication system to resolve humanity's ever-increasing and complicated problems.

The Spiritual Meaning of Wealth

One of the world's greatest driving forces is the desire for wealth. So many wars have been fought for money, and millions of lives have been lost in the pursuit of it. Every aspect of modern life is under its spell, and yet we really cannot define it. Wealth and money mean different things to different people, and they serve different purposes.

Investopedia defines wealth as: "the value of all the assets of worth owned by a person, community, company or country. Wealth is determined by taking the total market value of all physical and intangible assets owned and then subtracting all debts. Essentially, wealth is the accumulation of resources. Specific people, organizations, and nations are said to be wealthy when they can accumulate many valuable resources or goods.**"**

In simple language, it means all the worldly possessions a person has accumulated. In economic terms, wealth is explained in many ways — net worth for individuals and gross national product "GNP" for countries.

Before money was introduced, different societies had their exchange systems to create wealth and used wheat, rice, salt, cattle, and livestock. Silver and gold were used before currencies came to be, and since then, money has become the most common means of measuring wealth.

Considering all that, I've been thinking about defining wealth from a Baha'i point of view. Baha'u'llah, the prophet and founder of the Baha'i Faith wrote:

The essence of wealth is love for Me; whoso loveth Me is the possessor of all things, and he that loveth Me not is indeed of the poor and needy. This is that which the Finger of Glory and Splendour hath revealed.

This is the spiritual definition of true wealth. I understand it to mean that we acquire spiritual wealth when we work to develop virtues such as trustworthiness, truthfulness, assertiveness, compassion, honesty, honour, prayerfulness, etc.

If we spend our lives developing virtues, we will have something to show for it when our time in this world of material existence comes to an end, as these developed qualities will assist us in our next stage of existence.

Developing these virtues will naturally affect our financial and material lives. For example, as it relates to trustworthiness, Baha'u'llah said:

Trustworthiness is the greatest portal leading unto the tranquility and security of the people. In truth the stability of every affair hath depended and doth depend upon it. All the domains of power, of grandeur and of wealth are illumined by its light.

When it comes to a Baha'i perspective on wealth and money, several different ways of thinking about materialism come to mind. For one, Abdu'l-Baha, the son of Baha'u'llah and his designated successor, tells us that is nothing wrong with being rich or wanting to be wealthy.

Wealth is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired by an individual's own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, art and industry, and if it be expended for philanthropic purposes. Above all, if a judicious and resourceful individual should initiate measures which would universally enrich the masses of the people, there could be no undertaking greater than this, and it would rank in the sight of God as the supreme achievement, for such a benefactor would supply the needs and insure the comfort and well-being of a great multitude. Wealth is most commendable, provided the entire population is wealthy.

Baha'u'llah reminded us of the purpose of wealth and how it should be utilized in these words:

O CHILDREN OF DUST!
Tell the rich of the midnight sighing of the poor, lest heedlessness lead them into the path of destruction, and deprive them of the Tree of Wealth. To give and to be generous are attributes of Mine; well is it with him that adorneth himself with My virtues.

Based on my understanding of these quotations, I see wealth as an amazing tool for service to humanity, and I have not shied away from using my God-given abilities to strive to create wealth with this in mind.
However, in striving to earn money, I also work on detaching myself from it and continually call to mind my purpose of seeking spiritual wealth.
Baha'u'llah cautioned us:

"O SON OF BEING!
Busy not thyself with this world, for with fire We test the gold, and with gold, We test Our servants." –

The materialistic and capitalistic world that we live in tries to convince us that there is no higher goal in life than buying and consuming. In these

confusing times where “the cancer of consumerism” has taken hold of humanity, the Baha’i teachings tell us to look at wealth and life differently. Rather than living solely to maximize our pleasure, we can try our best to love the Creator and seek God’s pleasure and therefore love His creation — humanity. Instead of focusing only on personal satisfaction, we can turn away from ourselves and focus on a higher purpose. In this sense, we will be truly wealthy.

Abdu’l-Baha suggested how to prepare for the end of our lives. He said we should be as passengers packed and ready for the spiritual journey by becoming more detached from the material world. At that end of life, wealth loses its glitter and its charm, and the only thing that will satisfy our soul would be the fact that we understand the true meaning of wealth and use our material wealth for the good of others.

A Small Town's Simple Approach to Peace

Nineteen years ago, one of the churches in our little town started organizing a Peace Walk on each year's first day. They invited everyone to join, and I welcomed the invitation as a Baha'i.

Baha'is all over the world actively work for the oneness of humanity and peace on Earth, so with great joy, I attended the first Peace Walk and have participated in each one since the beginning.

The Peace Walk's route takes us through the center of town, and the cars on the road mostly honk in support of peace. All of my fellow peace walkers from different groups hold their homemade signs quoting sayings from their religions or ideologies.

I made a sign quoting Baha'u'llah, the founder of the Baha'i Faith: **"The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens."**

After the walk, we all go to a cozy hall in a senior housing facility's basement. There is no set program since we all know why we're there. We come from different religions, and some of us have no faith at all, but we each know that peace is essential to all of us. That shared conviction creates a feeling of togetherness for everyone. We spontaneously sing religious and non-religious songs, recite poetry and give short talks on peace. After that, everybody is invited to go for lunch at a Sikh temple nearby to enjoy the delicious homemade food prepared by the Sikh community.

I like many aspects of the Peace Walk but mainly appreciate its practical, simple approach to creating peace and oneness by sharing ideas, prayers, music and food with people from different backgrounds. This unity in diversity appeals to me immensely. It feels like a small family, each member representing a different country and religion, sitting down to eat and enjoy each other's company.

This year, one of the participants said this Baha'i prayer about peace and unity:

O Thou kind Lord! Thou hast created all humanity from the same stock. Thou hast decreed that all shall belong to the same household. In Thy Holy Presence they are all Thy servants, and all mankind are sheltered beneath Thy Tabernacle; all have gathered together at Thy

Table of Bounty; all are illumined through the light of Thy Providence. O God! Thou art kind to all, Thou hast provided for all, dost shelter all, conferrest life upon all. Thou hast endowed each and all with talents and faculties, and all are submerged in the Ocean of Thy Mercy. O Thou kind Lord! Unite all. Let the religions agree and make the nations one, so that they may see each other as one family and the whole earth as one home. May they all live together in perfect harmony. O God! Raise aloft the banner of the oneness of mankind. O God! Establish the Most Great Peace. Cement Thou, O God, the hearts together. O Thou kind Father, God! Gladden our hearts through the fragrance of Thy love. Brighten our eyes through the Light of Thy Guidance. Delight our ears with the melody of Thy Word, and shelter us all in the Stronghold of Thy Providence. Thou art the Mighty and Powerful, Thou art the Forgiving and Thou art the One Who overlooketh the shortcomings of all mankind. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 100.

After a few songs, we all listened to a talk about the need to take care of the refugees coming to our country from different war-torn places. After that, a 12-year-old Muslim boy sang a very heartwarming song about peace. Then came the turn of one of the Baha'is, a refugee himself, who talked about the biggest hindrance to peace—prejudice. He paid particular attention to the harm religious prejudice can inflict on society. His talk gave the audience, who were mostly religious, a chance to take stock of their own feelings about other religions.

He quoted the Baha'i teachings, which tell us about the importance of the removal of all kinds of prejudices:

Prejudices of religion, race or sect destroy the foundation of humanity. All the divisions in the world, hatred, war and bloodshed, are caused by one or other of these prejudices. The whole world must be looked upon as one single country, all the nations as one nation, all men as belonging to one race. Religions, races, and nations are all divisions of man's making only, and are necessary only in his thought; before God there are neither Persians, Arabs, French nor English; God is God for all, and to Him all creation is one. We must obey God, and strive to follow Him by leaving all our prejudices and bringing about peace on earth. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, p. 131.

Baha'is believe that one of the main hindrances preventing us from attaining peace today has involved only talking about peace and not taking real, substantive actions. We have many talks, books, conferences, treaties and high-minded thoughts about this subject—but not enough actual effort to achieve true peace:

Love ye all religions and all races with a love that is true and sincere and show that love through deeds and not through the tongue; for the latter hath no importance, as the majority of men are, in speech, well-wishers, while action is the best. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha*, p. 69.

Baha'is make an effort to participate in projects and processes that ensure peace by actions and not only words. Peace can sometimes seem like an unattainable dream, but it should not be that way. People on our Peace Walk have simplified it to small steps of coming out, being visible, and being heard, which show that we can peacefully unite despite any differences we may have. There is no reason why we all cannot do the same by reaching out to like-minded people or organizations and facilitating similar events. In this way, we can be the active catalysts of peace and not just passive bystanders on the sidelines.

What Does the “Oneness of Mankind” Really Mean?

I have always thought that I understood the significance of humanity's oneness as our ultimate goal since, to me, the world’s survival depends on it.

Moreover, as a Baha’i, I grew up hearing about that central Baha’i principle all the time, so the concept was imprinted on my psyche early in life.

Since I was interested and thought I had learned the meaning and implication of humanity's oneness, I began to read more and more of the writers, poets, philosophers, and great thinkers discussing this concept. I slowly realized that their ideas often took the hollow form of a slogan or a cliché. They said and wrote very inspiring things about global unity, no doubt, but lacked any practical suggestion or plan for how to achieve it.

Recently, as I was reading about man's nature and purpose in the Baha’i writings, I realized there is more to this concept than I had imagined. After those spiritual readings, I began to understand that the Creator made our Earth for human beings, thus giving us our ultimate destiny—to achieve the unity of humankind establishing God's kingdom on Earth. We are meant to live a life that God has desired us to live—to nurture our spiritual nature and live as spiritual beings, united in the way He intended us to ultimately live:

The successive Founders of all past Religions Who, from time immemorial, have shed, with ever-increasing intensity, the splendor of one common Revelation at the various stages which have marked the advance of mankind towards maturity may thus, in a sense, be regarded as preliminary Manifestations, anticipating and paving the way for the advent of that Day of Days when the whole earth will have fructified, and the tree of humanity will have yielded its destined fruit. – Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha’u’llah*, p. 166.

Can you believe that from the inception of the universe, all these billions of years, this goal has driven our destiny?

After that realization, I tried to examine this discovery's implications with new insight and attempted to understand what I missed all these years and what I need to relearn. I came across this quotation from the Baha’i teachings that enabled me to look at God’s plan's details. It clearly pinpoints the areas that we have to work on to get to our ultimate goal:

Let there be no mistake. The principle of the Oneness of Mankind—the pivot round which all the teachings of Baha'u'llah revolve—is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope. Its appeal is not to be merely identified with a reawakening of the spirit of brotherhood and good-will among men, nor does it aim solely at the fostering of harmonious cooperation among individual peoples and nations. Its implications are deeper, its claims greater than any which the Prophets of old were allowed to advance. Its message is applicable not only to the individual, but concerns itself primarily with the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family. It does not constitute merely the enunciation of an ideal, but stands inseparably associated with an institution adequate to embody its truth, demonstrate its validity, and perpetuate its influence. It implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced … It calls for no less than the reconstruction and the demilitarization of the whole civilized world—a world organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life, its political machinery, its spiritual aspiration, its trade and finance, its script and language, and yet infinite in the diversity of the national characteristics of its federated units. – Ibid., pp. 42-43.

There is no doubt in my mind that the unity of humankind is inevitable, but the question of how and where the changes have to happen to achieve it has yet to be answered. To create a world organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life, there must be a fundamental transformation in all areas of human life.

You may ask how it can be done. I have simplified the whole concept for me. As I understand it, the practical way of doing this—or at least the first step in its achievement—is to introduce spirituality and humanity into every aspect of life. For me, there are two ways of working towards this goal: first, internally, which means working on learning more, meditating more, purifying my life and becoming more spiritual each day. Second, externally, it means offering whatever I have learned or gained to contribute to all my life's activities and the advancement of civilization. In this small, individual way, I try to play my part.

We all have a part to play.

As just one example, our present economic system is sick and dying. It cannot meet the needs of humanity. The gap between rich and poor grows wider, increasing the suffering of the masses. It is time to re-examine the fundamental assumptions that this system was built on and replace them with humane, moral and spiritual ones. A shift in thinking is needed. By introducing spirituality into our economic activities, we can take steps to lay

the foundation for a better economic future. We have the solutions and the technology to build a new system; all we need is the resolve and the will. Everyone has an inherent power—and responsibility—to contribute.

Introducing more spiritual qualities into our lives lays the foundation for a new society and economic system. Some of those goals may seem idealistic, but Baha'is are idealists, dreaming of a better world and then actively working to make it happen. No great achievement can take place without a goal or dream. Without those aspirations, civilization would not have progressed from the Stone Age to where we are now.

We are all privileged to live in a time when the oneness of humankind grows nearer, even though we have to deal with the chaos and confusion related to the disintegration of the old order it is destined to replace. We have all the tools and the blueprint for the unity of humankind. As people come closer in physical connection and the degree of the separation of humanity shrinks, the challenge now is to bring the hearts and minds of the people closer through spirituality.

Millennials and Generation Z- Thank God They Are Not Like Me

In most societies, it's common for older people not to trust the judgement of younger people. The reason usually given is that youth lack experience. And this is true — young people *don't* have the same amount of experience. But this reasoning never satisfies me because it ignores some of the insight and courage of younger generations.

Working with young people most of my professional life, I've observed an increase in criticism of millennials and the generation after them. Generation Z. I see this on social media and hear it in my conversations, and I feel this attitude has become more extreme.

As the world's confusion and problems have increased in recent years, younger generations are getting more than their share of criticism. Many Baby Boomers wonder if there will be enough workers to care for them when they have to depend on the services they should see for the rest of their lives. At the same time, millennials and Generation Z wonder if there will be any future at all for them.

When I was young, I also had my share of older people saying I lacked experience. But within the Baha'i community, I was so proud to hear adults say, "Youth can move the world."

It's a quote that comes from the Universal House of Justice, the global governing body of the Baha'i Faith:

Undoubtedly, it is within your power to contribute significantly to shaping the societies of the coming century; youth can move the world. -The Universal House of Justice*,* Baha'i Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program

I think millennials are not following in the footsteps of older generations because the world's problems have led them to believe that they alone understand the gravity of the situation. After all, it directly affects them. They are the ones who have to solve it. In that way, I say, thank God they are not like my generation.

My aim is not to discredit the Baby Boomers, my generation, or the generations that came before. We worked hard and attained some significant achievements, but sadly, it often feels like those were mostly material achievements, and some of them came at a great price. The mistake that was made was an overemphasis on achieving wealth at any cost, believing that wealth signified progress.

What previous generations missed — and we are still missing — are the spiritual and moral goals to offset the damage created by excess material progress.

For man two wings are necessary. One wing is physical power and material civilization; the other is spiritual power and divine civilization. With one wing only, flight is impossible. Two wings are essential. Therefore, no matter how much material civilization advances, it cannot attain to perfection except through the uplift of spiritual civilization. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*

This lust for material progress has brought us to such a critical state that younger generations feel there will be no future left for them to enjoy. Their cries and protests can now be heard all over the world.

The Baha'i teachings uphold the belief that the young generation will bring about a new order and maintain its governance. So, I am very clear about my attitudes towards young people and have devoted my energies to encouraging and supporting them in any way possible.

The world's present problems are overwhelming and beyond our generation's capacity because our solutions are outdated and ineffective. The world needs a new and fundamental change in its outlook and approach to tackling the ever-increasing crisis of the world:

The present condition of the world — its economic instability, social dissensions, political dissatisfaction and international distrust – should awaken the youth from their slumber and make them inquire what the future is going to bring. It is surely they who will suffer most if some calamity sweep over the world. They should therefore open their eyes to the existing conditions, study the evil forces that are at play and then with a concerted effort arise and bring about the necessary reforms — reforms that shall contain within their scope the spiritual as well as social and political phases of human life. – Shoghi Effendi, March 13, 1932 to an individual believer, published in "Baha'i News" 68 (November 1932), p. 3.

I believe the recent challenges of our time have awakened the youth and brought forward many individuals that have exemplified passion, wisdom

and devotion to such an extent that they inspire admiration. Our future depends on the tender shoulders of the millennials and Generation Z. They can certainly use all the help and support they can get from my generation to undo the mistakes that we have made.

Fasting the Time of Spiritual House Cleaning

Those who know me are aware of my love for fasting. I have participated in the Baha'i Fast, 19 days in March, of abstaining from food and drink between sunrise and sunset, every year since the age of 15. Please don't misunderstand me. Even with all these years of experience, my body has never liked it and has made it clear to me that it does not share my enthusiasm.

Baha'i fasting is both a physical and spiritual exercise, which is why I am so attracted to it. The Baha'i teachings explain that fasting:

…is the cause of awakening man. The heart becomes tender, and the spirituality of man increases. This is produced by the fact that man's thoughts will be confined to the commemoration of God, and through this awakening and stimulation surely ideal advancements follow. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Star of the West*

I love fasting because I know as a human being during my daily life. I unknowingly subject my soul to many impurities. With this awareness, fasting has become my annual "House Cleaning."

In the same way that people clean their houses in the West before Christmas or in Iran before the New Year (Naw-Ruz), I clean with my soul.

My friends who are from different religions can't understand why I put myself through this hardship. They think the Baha'i Fast is not a good idea, but their concern allows me to inform them that fasting has been a part of most religions. When food is always available in modern life, people have forgotten about fasting to the extent that now they find it a strange practice. However, history gives us evidence of the existence of fasting in most cultures and religions.

Fasting has been part of coming-of-age preparations for adulthood. Boys from native cultures in North America would fast in the wilderness, seeking a vision of a guardian spirit. Hindus have some form of fasting, which is an avoidance of a particular food. Generally, the ladies fast for the sake of their husbands. The Sadhus of India and Sufis fast and meditate for enlightenment. Modern Jews fast for 24 hours as a penance.

Fasting is also very much part of priests' lives — holy men of various societies would fast in preparation for particular rituals. In most mystical

and monastic traditions, fasting is practiced as a means of purification. Roman Catholics traditionally abstain from meat on days associated with the passion of Christ. Added to that list are the Manifestations of God, who fasted and meditated to commune with God.

Islam is one religion that strictly tries to observe the law of fasting. In addition to obligatory prayer, fasting is the Muslim's essential ritual obligation; it is one of Islam's five pillars. Fasting in Islam consists of deliberately abstaining from all food, drink, and sexual relations from the first light before dawn until the last light. The Qur'an explicitly states that fasting is an obligation and has been central to earlier religions.

It is important to remember that the essence of fasting is the spiritual part of fasting. If depriving oneself of food was a sign of spirituality, then all the food-insecure people in the world would be holy men and saints.

For this material fast is an outer token of the spiritual fast; it is a symbol of self-restraint, the withholding of oneself from all appetites of the self, taking on the characteristics of the spirit, being carried away by the breathings of heaven and catching fire from the love of God. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Baha*

I believe that all the spiritual laws of God are for humanity's benefit, and the direct gain is for the individual who obeys them and follows them.

Each year, I pretend that I do not know anything about fasting and read the Holy Writings with an eager soul to uncover their mysteries. I also try to get rid of the filth attached to my soul through meditation. In a way, it is a time of self-examination, and as I get older, I find more benefits in fasting.

Science has now found that intermittent fasting is very beneficial for our bodies. It maintains that the body gets to direct its energies towards repairs by not eating for a length of time. This does not surprise me at all because I am discovering the wisdom and physical benefits of it. I am waiting for the day when humankind gets the chance to experience the sublime feeling of detachment from the body's need for food and focus on cleansing the spiritual aspect of their lives to start the process of the unification of humanity.

It may look strange to connect fasting with unity, but if we think deeply, we realize that the lack of a spiritual approach to the issues causes most conflicts and problems. That makes fasting and praying the most effective tools. Souls are linked together with a string of divinity.

The Baha'i Writings tell us:

The Fast is essentially a period of meditation and prayer, of spiritual recuperation, during which the believer must strive to make the

necessary readjustments in his inner life, and to refresh and reinvigorate the spiritual forces latent in his soul. – Directives from the Guardian

This year, I hope to introduce my mind and soul to fasting and experience the sense of purification by following this instruction for my spiritual betterment.

We Need to Replace Money as a Measure of Success

Humanity needs a new yardstick to measure achievement—today, we quantify it with money and material gain, the worst possible way to evaluate real success in life.

Money serves as an inadequate way to measure life's achievements. How can a solely materialistic tool pass judgment and render a verdict on our life's attainments?

We need to replace money as a measure of success with a more spiritual or humane one. However, that would necessarily involve a revolution in our current system of values in fighting the cancer of materialism that has eaten into every fabric of our lives and endangered the future of humankind and the planet.

One of the world's most significant driving forces is and has traditionally been the desire for money. So many wars have been fought for it, and millions of lives have been lost for it. No aspect of modern life seems immune from its spell.

Accordingly, we have to look for a better place to invest our God-given gift of life with all its talents and abilities. This gift of life—meant to be spent on acquiring spiritual qualities, knowledge, and the sciences and arts—does not focus on transitory achievements and material goods. Life serves a higher cause than money.

So, the time has come to try to create and define a new and comprehensive yardstick that covers all areas of our lives, reflecting our spiritual and human achievements alongside the material ones. This new yardstick will help us understand and work on all aspects of our lives—not just material prosperity. Then, we can rationally decide the importance of money or lack of money in our lives and to what extent we have to invest our energies in it.

The Baha'i teachings say there is nothing wrong with money as a tool as long as we're aware of its use and its danger in relation to our lives total goals. It can be given value for measurement, then, as long as it serves its purpose:

Wealth is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired by an individual's own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, art and industry, and if it be expended for philanthropic purposes. Above all, if a judicious and resourceful individual should initiate measures which would universally enrich the masses of the people, there could be no undertaking greater than this, and it would rank in the sight of God as the supreme achievement, for such a benefactor would supply the needs and insure the comfort and well-being of a great multitude. Wealth is most commendable, provided the entire population is wealthy. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, p. 24.

If we move our measurement of achievement away from money, what should our yardstick measure? Since the spiritual and human qualities aren't always tangible, we might want to change our focus to the many inner human character virtues accepted in most religions and moral codes. Here are just a few:

Trustworthiness, truthfulness, assertiveness, caring, cleanliness, compassion, confidence, consideration, courage, courtesy, creativity, detachment, determination, enthusiasm, excellence, faithfulness, flexibility, forgiveness, friendliness, generosity, gentleness, helpfulness, honesty, honour, humility, idealism, joyfulness, justice, kindness, love, loyalty, mercy, moderation, modesty, obedience, orderliness, patience, peacefulness, prayerfulness, purposefulness, reliability, respect, responsibility, reverence, self-discipline, service, steadfastness, tact, thankfulness, tolerance, trust, unity …

The list could go on and on, but some of these virtues have been emphasized in the Baha'i writings and other religions—truthfulness and trustworthiness, to name just two. These important qualities are good starting points. But first, we have to change our way of thinking and accept that our human and spiritual qualities are more important than our material possessions. We have to expand our minds and souls to grasp the importance of spiritual and moral attributes over tangible gains. That process can start by reviewing what the Baha'i writings have to say about these valuable qualities:

Trustworthiness is the greatest portal leading unto the tranquility and security of the people. In truth the stability of every affair hath depended and doth depend upon it. All the domains of power, of grandeur and of wealth are illumined by its light. – Baha'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, p. 37.

Truthfulness is the foundation of all human virtues. Without truthfulness progress and success, in all the worlds of God, are

impossible for any soul. When this holy attribute is established in man, all the divine qualities will also be acquired. – Abdu'l-Baha, quoted by Shoghi Effendi in *The Advent of Divine Justice*, p. 26.

Suppose we adopted trustworthiness and truthfulness as moral measuring tools to reflect our spiritual progress more than money. In that case, that new yardstick could become a source of encouragement for many people who think they have failed in life. This would create a new way of getting rich in a real sense and leaving the rat race of material acquisition—a step in the right direction that leads towards transformation into a new race of more spiritual human beings.

We cannot readily visualize such a yardstick now, but this will become clearer to us as we progress spiritually. If humankind sets the right course to survive, it has to shed some of the old values and criteria used to measure its progress in the past. New measures have to be adopted—like finding a new yardstick to replace the money. Money has played its part in the past, but it renders us a great disservice and has become the creator of great miseries worldwide. The sooner we start this adjustment, the sooner we'll get on course to prepare the world for true progress.

Ditching the ‘Survival of the Fittest’ Mentality

Most people think that human beings are fundamentally competitive, and they may be right if we look at human history. Industrialists and economists believed that Darwin’s theories justified an economy of vicious competition and inequality. This has left us with a legacy that says that the corporate economy — where wealth stays in the hands of a few — is best for humanity. This was always a distortion of Darwin’s ideas. Darwin, in his book “The Descent of Man,” states that the human species had succeeded because of qualities like sharing and compassion**:**

Those communities, which included the greatest number of the most sympathetic members would flourish best, and rear the greatest number of offspring. – Charles Darwin

He was not an economist, but wealth-sharing and cooperation have always looked more consistent with his conclusions.

Studies and research have been done on animals and humans to highlight the benefits of cooperation. One of them was done by Michael Tomasello, who has done years of studies and concluded that the result in the study of animals showed that social selection had favoured cooperation. He wrote:

Individuals who attempted to hog all of the food at a scavenged carcass would be actively repelled by others, and perhaps shunned in other ways as well.

Humanity began its existence during the Stone Age when the survival of the fittest was the rule of the time. It had to compete with the elements and hunt for food for its survival. Unfortunately, as man’s intellect developed and his economic circumstances improved, he did not have to be the fittest to survive, but he behaved in the same manner. It is an accepted philosophy that competition is praiseworthy at any cost and in all manners without considering the consequences. Economic theories are constructed on this philosophy, and it has become second nature in most capitalistic societies. Baha’i Writings do not agree with this philosophy.

In a talk in Washington, D.C. in 1912, Abdu’l-Baha, the son of Baha’u’llah, the prophet and founder of the Baha’i Faith, said:

In the world of nature we behold the living organisms in a ceaseless struggle for existence. Everywhere we are confronted by the evidences of the physical survival of the fittest. This is the very source of error and misapprehension in the opinions and the theories of man who fail to realize that the world of nature is inherently defective in cause and outcome and that the defects therein must be removed by education.

In another talk at Stanford University that same year, Abdu'l-Baha explained:

In nature there is the law of the survival of the fittest. Even if man be not educated, then according to the natural institutes this natural law will demand of man supremacy. The purpose and object of schools, colleges and universities is to educate man and thereby rescue and redeem him from the exigencies and defects of nature and to awaken within him the capability of controlling and appropriating nature's bounties.

Although collaboration is getting more recognition these days, it still has been entirely ignored in the economic field. The recent pandemic has highlighted both sides. We have seen the ugly side when different countries and states compete to buy the equipment to fight the virus, which led to skyrocketing prices that the developing countries can never afford. We can find countless examples of collaboration between individuals, communities, nations, and companies. People went out of their way to cooperate and share their resources. I read a social media statement that caught my attention: "Collaboration is our world's most essential value right now."

It briefly explains the importance of collaboration instead of competing. It looks to me and many others that humanity's survival depends on this essential human quality instilled in our soul's DNA by the creator.

This is how Abdu'l-Baha described cooperation:

Regarding reciprocity and cooperation: each member of the body politic should live in the utmost comfort and welfare because each individual member of humanity is a member of the body politic and if one member of the members be in distress or be afflicted with some disease all the other members must necessarily suffer. For example, a member of the human organism is the eye. If the eye should be affected that affliction would affect the whole nervous system. Hence, if a member of the body politic becomes afflicted, in reality, from the standpoint of sympathetic connection, all will share that affliction since this (one afflicted) is a member of the group of members, a part of the whole. Is it possible for one member or part to be in distress and the other members to be at ease? It is impossible! Hence God has desired

that in the body politic of humanity each one shall enjoy perfect welfare and comfort.

Time has come to do away with old habits of competition that have stayed with us from our primitive days. Even though the scenario has now changed, we still compete for territory instead of hunting and fighting; firms, businesses, and corporations compete in the same spirit of destruction. The big fish eats the small fish, which is considered a success. But it is time for the fish to live and collaborate. We must educate ourselves to eliminate this remnant of Stone Age behaviour, which has no place in modern society.

There is nothing wrong with competing. We have seen even in the writings that encourage competing in the service to humanity. If we want to compete, it should be in the spiritual realm; we should strive to be the most generous person and kind. That is the real competition.

That is a healthy and spiritual competition that creates no harm and just increases the level of service to God and humanity. I am waiting for the day when the phrase “Survival of the Nicest” becomes more popular and appreciated.

Should We Fear God or Love God?

The phrase “fear of God” creates strong feelings in the hearts of most people. Yet, it has been used in the writings of religions throughout history.

According to Wikipedia, fear of God “refers to fear or a specific sense of respect, awe, and submission to a deity.” People subscribing to prevalent monotheistic religions might fear divine judgment, hell, or God’s omnipotence.

Growing up, my knowledge of the fear of God was very elementary. Like most people, I had a fear of going to hell and suffering for eternity. When I did something terrible, God the all-seeing, I used to think that He would see my actions and think of a punishment sooner or later. And then I would pay for my sins. Gradually, I came to understand it better.

I am sure people who do not believe in a higher power see the whole concept of God's fear as a gimmick to control the ignorant. I do not blame them for thinking that since sometimes, I struggle to understand it.

However, after referring to the Baha’i writings, my vision has changed. First, I realized that God is not someone who is waiting for us to make a mistake and punish us.

Abdu’l-Baha, the son of Baha’u’llah, the prophet and founder of the Baha’i Faith, explained that **“God is the Father of all. He educates, provides for and loves all; for they are His servants and His creation.”**

A recent personal experience also made me think differently. I have a beautiful garden with many varieties of flowers and fruit trees. It has been my prize material possession and a source of fantastic pleasure. I share the fruits with everyone in the community. Flowers attract birds and insects, and among them are a few families of hummingbirds who enjoy the flowers that I have planted for them. I have put out a feeder specifically for them. I was not surprised to see that they enjoyed the feeders so much that they decided not to migrate. Instead, these hummingbirds have stayed the winter with me for the past few years. I put out the feeders for the whole winter since no flowers or other food sources exist.

Last year was extremely cold, and for more than a month, the temperature went below zero. The feeder would freeze at night, which meant that I had

to defrost the feeder every morning and put it out again. They knew the routine and were always waiting for me, chirping to tell me to hurry up.

One day, as I was putting out the feeder for them and watching their happiness, it dawned on me that they would die if I did not feed them. Then I realized how much I loved them and how sad I would be without them. I had even cancelled a trip to take care of them. How I wished that they knew how much I loved them. They didn't realize that their life was in my hands — or that I made sure they were provided for — because of my love for them. Nobody asked me to do that.

At that moment, I felt how God must think about us. He loves us, and because of that love, he created us. He did not have to do it, but he created the whole universe, and all he wished was that we try to know him and show our love to him.

That opened my spiritual eye, and the fear of God disappeared. I thought about how all I had to do was follow his teachings that had been given to humanity through his manifestations. Without divine guidance, humanity cannot find the right path to spiritual progress. Abdu'l-Baha explains:

Some imagine that an innate sense of human dignity will prevent man from committing evil actions and insure his spiritual and material perfection. That is, that an individual who is characterized with natural intelligence, high resolve, and a driving zeal, will, without any consideration for the severe punishments consequent on evil acts, or for the great rewards of righteousness, instinctively refrain from inflicting harm on his fellow men and will hunger and thirst to do good. And yet, if we ponder the lessons of history it will become evident that this very sense of honor and dignity is itself one of the bounties deriving from the instructions of the Prophets of God. We also observe in infants the signs of aggression and lawlessness, and that if a child is deprived of a teacher's instructions his undesirable qualities increase from one moment to the next. It is therefore clear that the emergence of this natural sense of human dignity and honor is the result of education.

In life, we have our role models — someone we love, respect, and admire immensely. They could be our parents, coach, teacher, or mentor. We do everything to please them, and disobeying them is the last thing in our minds. We do that because we know that they love us, and listening to them is for our benefit.

Baha'u'llah tells us to **"Adorn your heads with the garlands of trustworthiness and fidelity, your hearts with the attire of the fear of God."**

In my spiritual immaturity and limited brainpower, I see God's love and the fear of God as the same. So, in my mind, when I read the Baha'i writings on this subject, I replaced the word "fear" with "love," and then it all made sense to me.

Baha'u'llah wrote of "**the fear of God, a fear that encompasseth all things, and reigneth over all things,**" and he wrote that "**We have admonished Our loved ones to fear God, a fear which is the fountain-head of all goodly deeds and virtues**."

Again, in my mind, I replace the word "fear" with "love." You can try replacing the word "fear" with "love," too.

My fear of God is the fear of me not measuring up to his expectations, knowing that by not following his teachings, I have deprived myself of his limitless blessing — his love — and that creates great fear in my heart. I believe that fear of God is an essential policing tool to help keep my conscience in check. It serves to remind me of the consequences of not following the right path.

Profit-Sharing: Does it Make Economic and Spiritual Sense?

Sharing the profit of any business with its employees pleases my economic side—and my mystic side.

Profit-sharing makes perfect sense to me to share my understanding from an economic and spiritual point of view, as an economist and a Baha'i.

First of all, profit-sharing is such a generous action. It demonstrates sympathy, fairness, caring, unity, and the recognition of equality since everyone in the business has a sense of ownership when management shares profits with the workers.

The Baha'i teachings strongly support the sharing of profits with employees. When owners and management take care of workers, it allows them to be of service, and of course, it is an incentive and a privilege for workers to share in their organization's profits:

It is preferable, then, that some measure of moderation be achieved, and by moderation is meant the enactment of such laws and regulations as would prevent the unwarranted concentration of wealth in the hands of the few and satisfy the essential needs of the many. For instance, the factory owners reap a fortune every day, but the wage the poor workers are paid cannot even meet their daily needs: This is most unfair, and assuredly no just man can accept it. Therefore, laws and regulations should be enacted which would grant the workers both a daily wage and a share in a fourth or fifth of the profits of the factory in accordance with its means, or which would have the workers equitably share in some other way in the profits with the owners. For the capital and the management come from the latter and the toil and labour from the former. The workers could either be granted a wage that adequately meets their daily needs, as well as a right to a share in the revenues of the factory when they are injured, incapacitated, or unable to work, or else a wage could be set that allows the workers to both satisfy their daily needs and save a little for times of weakness and incapacity. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, pp. 316-317.

… the owners of properties, mines and factories should share their incomes with their employees and give a fairly certain percentage of

their products to their workingmen in order that the employees may receive, beside their wages, some of the general income of the factory so that the employee may strive with his soul in the work. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Foundations of World Unity*, p. 43.

One of the other benefits of profit-sharing is reducing or eliminating strikes. Sharing the earnings creates a sense of togetherness and unity so that the workers will resist the temptation of strikes in favour of friendly negotiations. The employees will have less reason to strike, knowing that as a result of a strike, they will lose, too.

Now, let's examine the concept of profit-sharing from an economic viewpoint. Many studies have been done in this field, and those studies have found benefits in terms of loyalty, productivity and taxation. Owen E. Richardson, in his essay "The Advantages of Profit-Sharing Plans," breaks these down:

- **Loyalty**: Loyalty significantly increases with remuneration. Employees that are offered an opportunity to participate in a profit-sharing plan invest more devotion to their position because of the direct reward associated with it. In addition, it shows the company is invested in the employees and creates a sense of parity rather than a composition of titles and ranks; employees envision themselves as transcending associate status and tend to see themselves as co-owners.

- **Productivity**: Employees invested in a profit-sharing plan begin to take ownership of the business as their work role becomes more defined by their contribution. **"A plan that rewards employees with a share of the fruits of their labour draw a direct connection between work and reward,"** writes Stu Watson for the Edward Lowe Foundation. Productivity maintains higher levels when employees are given the opportunity to share in the profit margin they are creating through their efforts rather than being merely compensated for time on the job.

- **Tax Benefits**: Employees can use a 401k as a tax deduction tool on their personal income taxes, reducing their adjusted gross income by sheltering profit-sharing contributions in a tax-deferred plan. Contributions to a 401k are only taxed at the time of withdrawal, allowing the employee's contributions to growing tax-deferred until the funds are withdrawn or dispersed in payments.

For those who want to study this subject more, the Harvard Business Review published an interesting article called "Huawei: A Case Study of When Profit Sharing Works."

But I'm convinced that the emotional, psychological and spiritual benefits of profit-sharing—such as unity, harmony, a happy working environment, a sense of belonging, having a common interest and a reduction of stress levels—exceed even the economic benefits.

Baha'is believe we should recognize and study these factors and eventually give them paramount importance in any economic system**.**

With its combination of spirituality and economics, this approach satisfies my belief that science and religion must coexist in harmony, just as the employer and employee relationship should exist in a state of harmony. If the unity of humanity is a goal for you, then profit sharing can help bring that goal much closer.

An Alternative Approach to Prevent Mass Shootings

"There was another shooting in a school today," a teacher friend of mine said. "What about writing an article relating to these terrible tragedies?"

My field is economics, so I initially felt hesitant—but I reminded myself about the many years I worked in the school system. My first and foremost responsibility was protecting my precious students from the usual drama and bullying.

I told my friend that I would try, so this is my attempt to share what's in my heart about these horrible mass shootings.

At the outset, I admit that I don't have all the solutions. I'm uncomfortable even tackling the subject due to its explosive and political nature, the polarization of emotions it evokes, and my personal experience with violence. Also, as a Baha'i, I will not insert myself into the party politics that have become so tied up in this issue.

But these horrific killings must stop, so we need to start somewhere.

We have to remember these mass shooters—these killers of children—did not come from the moon or some other planet. These disturbed individuals were and are our kids, our students, our neighbours, our cousins, and even our friends. Many of them were almost invisible to us, but yet they existed, and most of us missed the signs of their struggles. We failed to see how ill-equipped they were to deal with the realities around them, and as a consequence, we did not help them. Instead, we shunned them, disenfranchised them or ignored them.

As you can already see, I want to take a self-examining approach to the problem instead of pointing the finger at the usual people and organizations. Rather than looking elsewhere, let's look at ourselves first. I believe we spend very little time exploring our own roles in this crisis. Consequently, we don't do enough to discover how we can empower ourselves and others to avoid these tragedies.

We can all do things that may lead to preventing more disasters. We can pay attention to those who are ignored, bullied, or ostracized. We can show them that we care, build alternative activities that allow them some respite from their negative environments, and connect them to positive, welcoming

people, courses, and group activities. For example, we can connect them with Baha'i youth activities that focus on spiritual and moral education and serve the community. There are countless things we could do if we cared enough and loved enough.

The Baha'i teachings ask us to love everyone because God, in His wisdom, knows that love is the real solution. Abdu'l-Baha, who exemplified love all his life through his actions, said:

Love gives life to the lifeless. Love lights a flame in the heart that is cold. Love brings hope to the hopeless and gladdens the hearts of the sorrowful. In the world of existence, there is indeed no greater power than the power of love. – *Paris Talks*, p. 179.

When I worked in the educational system, I had some sleepless nights worrying about some of the kids I knew, who were so full of anger and frustration that I was afraid that they might do some harm to themselves or others. Many staff members in just about every school have felt these experiences.

You might ask: Why were those students so hurt and angry? I would say because they were not getting enough love, care and attention. Most were deeply lonely, believing strongly that nobody understood or cared about them. They craved love, but they were getting anger, punishment and disciplinary rules that aimed to set them right without addressing the root cause of their problems.

However, I am not trying to portray mass shooters as victims. I am fully aware that some had serious issues and needed professional help. Yet, in some ways, they, too, are, like you and I, victims of a disease that we all are subjected to, and that is living in societies where we don't receive enough love and understanding. I call the cause of this disease vitamin L deficiency—the absence of love. In most cases, the essentially spiritual remedy of love can work much more effectively than many other legal prevention solutions.

Alternatively, we could arm more guards to protect our schools, shopping malls and public places; we could install metal detectors everywhere, and we could do more body searches to confiscate weapons—but since those things aren't very practical or effective, ultimately, I wish we would spend our time and resources on how, as a society, we can reach out to those angry and hurting individuals before they do something wrong.

How can we, as human beings, lessen the emotional burden of people breaking down under the pressure of life's problems, which will lead them to an awful path and guide our children into grave danger? The Baha'i

teachings say we can take action to truly begin to address the Vitamin L deficiency so many people suffer from: **"Love manifests its reality in deeds, not only in words—these alone are without effect."** – Ibid., p. 36.

If we cared for and loved all human beings and did so with deeds rather than words, I believe many of those disturbed, angry shooters might choose a different path. I know this well since I witnessed the drastic change that love and caring made for many of my own students, who I honestly thought might do some harm. In all my years of dealing with troubled kids, I learned to look beyond their anger, bad behaviour and all the negative barriers they put up in order not to get hurt—because behind all that hostility was usually a scared little person crying out for attention, who just wanted to be accepted and loved as we all do.

So we can take the usual route of blaming our governments for lack of proper gun control, gun makers, violent video games and all the rest of the players in this sad affair. Still, I strongly suggest we first look at ourselves, accept some of the responsibility, and resolve to befriend the sad, alienated, and potentially explosive.

By being aware of our own potential power as a preventive agent in these mass shootings, combined with proper legal prevention measures and reasonable safety precautions, we can dream of a day when these tragedies will be nothing but a bizarre footnote in a very sad and dark period of human history.

How to Spend Your Money—Spiritually

Do we have to justify our spending to anyone? Most people would answer, "No—my money is mine, I earned it, and I can spend it any way I want!"

Some people consider themselves hedonists, a school of thought that argues that pleasure and happiness are the primary or most important intrinsic goods and the proper aim of human life. Hedonists strive to maximize net pleasure, so for them, spending any amount of money in the pursuit of pleasure would seem justifiable.

Entire life philosophies have been built around this idea, including one called ethical hedonism—the idea that all people have the right to do everything in their power to achieve the greatest amount of pleasure possible. Ethical hedonism maintains that every person's pleasure should far surpass the amount of pain. Started by Aristippus of Cyrene, a student of Socrates, ethical hedonists hold the idea that pleasure constitutes the highest good.

The Baha'i teachings look at life differently. Rather than living solely to maximize our own pleasure, Baha'is try their best to love the Creator, seek God's pleasure, and therefore love His creation—humanity. Instead of focusing solely on personal pleasure, the Baha'i writings say, we should turn away from ourselves and focus on a higher purpose:

If thou lovest Me, turn away from thyself; and if thou seekest My pleasure, regard not thine own; that thou mayest die in Me and I may eternally live in thee. – Baha'u'llah, *The Hidden Words*, p. 5.

So try this: take a look at your personal spending in that light.

In one way, our spending reflects our values. "You are what you buy," as one writer put it. If you spend primarily on yourself and your own pleasure, it may indicate a lack of empathy for or awareness of other people's needs.

On the other hand, if most of your spending goes to help others, it is obvious that you have come to recognize the extreme poverty in the world and the fact that not much has been done to remedy it. If you're fully aware of the great poverty in the world today, you soon recognize that you'll have to answer to your conscience for any unnecessary or selfish spending. That

compassionate awareness, and the actions that accompany it, can make our material choices into spiritual decisions:

Certainly, some being enormously rich and others lamentably poor, an organization is necessary to control and improve this state of affairs. It is important to limit riches, as it is also of importance to limit poverty. Either extreme is not good. To be seated in the mean is most desirable. If it be right for a capitalist to possess a large fortune, it is equally just that his workman should have a sufficient means of existence.

A financier with colossal wealth should not exist whilst near him is a poor man in dire necessity. When we see poverty allowed to reach a condition of starvation it is a sure sign that somewhere we shall find tyranny. Men must bestir themselves in this matter, and no longer delay in altering conditions which bring the misery of grinding poverty to a very large number of the people. The rich must give of their abundance, they must soften their hearts and cultivate a compassionate intelligence, taking thought for those sad ones who are suffering from lack of the very necessities of life. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, p. 152.

No power in the world can force people to re-examine or justify their spending habits, except the power of our own realization and awareness of the level of poverty of our fellow human beings who are barely surviving. By reconsidering your spending habits, you may soon find it hard to spend money on unnecessary pleasures and desires. Instead, you might find yourself spending your resources on your essential needs so that you can have enough left over to help the poor and needy.

The Baha'i teachings gently remind us that we human beings are one—that every individual is part of the human family. In other words, we're all relatives. Would you want your relatives to live in abject poverty, hunger and want while you spent your resources on luxuries and pleasures for yourself?

Know ye that the poor are the trust of God in your midst. Watch that ye betray not His trust, that ye deal not unjustly with them and that ye walk not in the ways of the treacherous. Ye will most certainly be called upon to answer for His trust on the day when the Balance of Justice shall be set, the day when unto every one shall be rendered his due, when the doings of all men, be they rich or poor, shall be weighed. – Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 251.

Baha'is believe that humanity is gradually waking up to the fact that we have a very important responsibility and duty to look after the poor and needy, to make sure that they are cared for and live happily. This is a God-given duty. They have been entrusted to us, and by caring for them, we take

a step towards the unity of humanity and a future society in which there are no poor.

Evolution: The Human Race, Maturing Past Materialism

The popular evolutionary belief declares that we have been created like all other animals and have evolved to become human beings.

From a Baha'i perspective, that scientific conclusion doesn't tell the whole human story.

In fact, that view can be understood in a way that undermines humanity's spiritual station and destiny. It sets the bar low for working towards our goals and creates the expectation of violence, wars and other destructive forces as acceptable behaviour.

That view basically asks: If we're animals, shouldn't we act like animals?

However, the Baha'i teachings and all other religions have a very different view—that we, in essence, are spiritual beings and have been created to gain human experience. We come from the Creator, which means we have a spiritual destiny—a spiritual journey to traverse to transform our souls so that we gain the presence of God:

God in his wisdom has created all things. Nothing has been created without a special destiny, for every creature has an innate station of attainment. This flower has been created to mirror forth a harmonious ensemble of color and perfume. Each kingdom of nature holds potentialities, and each must be cultivated in order to reach its fulfillment. The divine teachers desire man to be educated that he may attain to the high rank of his own reality … – Abdu'l-Baha, *Divine Philosophy*, p. 110.

History proves that humanity has not lived a very humane life so far and has acted too often on its animal impulses. So, in that sense, human history has not yet begun. The so-called human history to date records a welter of wars, conflicts, aggression, destruction and misery. To achieve our destiny—to fully mature into our spiritual reality—humanity must first discover its true nature and then take steps to begin a spiritual transformation in all aspects of its collective life.

In order to accomplish that transition, we will need to find ways to subordinate our lower natures, then find the true purpose of our creation and move towards it.

At this time in our history, it is almost impossible to imagine the qualities and abilities of that new, spiritual race of human beings. Because our understanding is limited and we do not have the spiritual insight to picture it, all we can do at this time is to continue on our path of personal growth by relying on the spiritual guidance given to us by Baha'u'llah, keeping in mind what our Creator intended for our existence:

O Son of Spirit! Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created. – Baha'u'llah, *The Hidden Words*, p. 9.

Once we begin the transformation process, we have to redefine many of the concepts from our past. The definitions of such concepts as success, wealth and possessions need to reflect their true meanings, connecting our material achievements and aspirations with spiritual ones:

Then it is clear that the honour and exaltation of man cannot reside solely in material delights and earthly benefits. This material felicity is wholly secondary, while the exaltation of man resides primarily in such virtues and attainments as are the adornments of the human reality. These consist in divine blessings, heavenly bounties, heartfelt emotions, the love and knowledge of God, the education of the people, the perceptions of the mind, and the discoveries of science. They consist in justice and equity, truthfulness and benevolence, inner courage and innate humanity, safeguarding the rights of others and preserving the sanctity of covenants and agreements. They consist in rectitude of conduct under all circumstances, love of truth under all conditions, self-abnegation for the good of all people, kindness and compassion for all nations, obedience to the teachings of God, service to the heavenly Kingdom, guidance for all mankind, and education for all races and nations. This is the felicity of the human world! This is the exaltation of man in the contingent realm! This is the eternal life and heavenly honour! – Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, newly revised edition, pp. 89-90.

Past generations have spent so much energy to gain material possessions, believing them to represent the ultimate goals in life, and, as a result, have neglected their spiritual needs and growth. Humanity's vision of itself and its destiny has been misguided and, in the end, led to nothing of real value in the eyes of God:

The All-Merciful hath conferred upon man the faculty of vision, and endowed him with the power of hearing. Some have described him as the "lesser world," when, in reality, he should be regarded as the "greater world." The potentialities inherent in the station of man, the full measure of his destiny on earth, the innate excellence of his reality, must all be manifested in this promised Day of God. – Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 340.

As we move forward, both as individuals and as the human race, we have to change our external tools and replace them with spiritual tools and concepts to guide us to our true destiny. We need to shed our animalistic tendencies and acquire virtues that will allow us to follow a spiritual path toward peace and unity.

That means many of the criteria we have used to measure our achievements, such as money and wealth, have to be transformed into spiritual ones. We are on a spiritual journey, and our lives should reflect that powerful reality.

In Search of a Moral Economy

The Baha'i teachings advocate for humanity and morality in our economic activities and incorporate them into our economic systems.

But how does humanity and morality—spirituality, really—fit into an economic system? To most people, those subjects sound completely separate.

I'm an economist, so it surprised me when I learned that the first book written by 18th-century Scottish economist Adam Smith was *The Theory of Moral Sentiments.* It was published seven years before his magnum opus, *The Wealth of Nations,* which founded modern economic theory and virtually invented the free market idea. Moral values and modern economy? It never occurred to me that morality might be part of his philosophy.

But the Baha'i writings also speak of a fundamentally spiritual solution to the world's economic problems:

No religious books of the past prophets speak of the economic question, while this problem has been thoroughly solved in the teachings of Baha'u'llah. Certain regulations are revealed which insure the welfare and well being of all humanity. Just as the rich man enjoys his rest and his pleasures surrounded by luxuries, the poor man must likewise have a home, be provided with sustenance, and not be in want. Until this is effected happiness is impossible. All are equal in the estimation of God; their rights are one and there is no distinction for any soul; all are protected beneath the justice of God. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Star of the West*, Volume 6, p. 5.

Every economist studies *The Wealth of Nations,* and most will tell you that Adam Smith's work is all about the science of making wealth. His ideas have formed the guidelines for so many economists, and his words are still the accepted authority on the subject. His influence is still felt, and his assumptions are still the foundation of economics.

But Adam Smith certainly recognized the inherent danger of wealth, even as he provided ideas for generating it:

This disposition to admire, and almost to worship, the rich and powerful, and to despise or, at least, neglect persons of poor and mean

conditions, though necessary both to establish and to maintain the distinction of ranks and the order of society, is, at the same time, the great and most universal cause of the corruption of our moral sentiments.

The Baha'i writings make a very similar point:

… the happiness and greatness, the rank and station, the pleasure and peace, of an individual have never consisted in his personal wealth, but rather in his excellent character, his high resolve, the breadth of his learning, and his ability to solve difficult problems. – Abdu'l-Baha, the Secret of Divine Civilization, p. 23.

One of the most prevalent concepts in the economy, and one of Smith's most significant assumptions, was the concept of the "Invisible Hand," which brooked no interference from the government in the economic marketplace—because Smith's invisible hand would magically solve the problems, balance supply and demand and also fix prices in an unregulated economy. Thus, Smith has been called the founder of "laissez-faire capitalism" and denigrated for his lack of a moral component in his economic theories.

But suppose you combine this "invisible hand" idea with Smith's Theory of Moral Sentiments, where he says that human beings have a natural tendency to care about others' well-being. In that case, you get a different picture of this conceptual framework:

The administration of the great system of the universe … the care of the universal happiness of all rational and sensible beings, is the business of God and not of man. To man is allotted a much humbler department, but one much more suitable to the weakness of his powers, and to the narrowness of his comprehension: the care of his own happiness, of that of his family, his friends, his country …. But though we are … endowed with a very strong desire of those ends, it has been entrusted to the slow and uncertain determinations of our reason to find out the proper means of bringing them about. – Adam Smith, The Theory of Moral Sentiments, p. 3.

Smith's quotations indicate that he strongly believed in morality. He discussed the welfare of the individual, saying it depends on the welfare of all: "No society can surely be flourishing and happy," he wrote in *Moral Sentiments*, "of which the far greater part of the members are poor and miserable."

The Baha'i teachings explain how crucial it is to bridge the gap between extremes of wealth and poverty:

God is not partial and is no respecter of persons. He has made provision for all. The harvest comes forth for everyone. The rain showers upon everybody, and the heat of the sun is destined to warm everyone. The verdure of the earth is for everyone. Therefore, there should be the utmost happiness, the utmost comfort, and the utmost well-being for all humanity.

But if conditions are such that some are happy and comfortable and some in misery, some are accumulating exorbitant wealth and others are in dire want — under such a system it is impossible for man to be happy and impossible for him to win the good pleasure of God. God is kind to all. The good pleasure of God consists in the welfare of all the individual members of mankind. – Abdu'l-Baha, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 312.

The Universal House of Justice recently reminded us of the same important point:

The welfare of any segment of humanity is inextricably bound up with the welfare of the whole. Humanity's collective life suffers when any one group thinks of its own well-being in isolation from that of its neighbours' or pursues economic gain without regard for how the natural environment, which provides sustenance for all, is affected. - March 1, 2017.

Smith said, **"To feel much for others and little for ourselves; to restrain our selfishness and exercise our benevolent affections, constitute the perfection of human nature."**

I am so grateful that I discovered the moral side of economics—and how I wish more economists would, too. We need to talk about this in our universities and make it an essential part of economic studies to learn the relationship between morality and economics.

If the economic system were to truly serve humanity, it should reflect the human, moral and spiritual values of the people who created it.

A person through his own actions and deeds makes himself loved or disliked by the people; or through his own unselfish conduct and behaviour, refined morality and selfless intention, trustworthiness and rectitude he suffers himself to become favoured and beloved at the threshold of God. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Star of the West*, Volume 4, p. 168.

A Way Out of Extreme Wealth

"82% of the wealth generated in 2017 in the world went to the richest 1%." That headline led the news today, and it made me feel horrible.

The article went on to say: "The economic lives of 3.7 billion poor did not improve from last year."

The news report, seen on TV, in newspapers and all across social media, said: "A CEO from one of the world's top five global fashion brands has to work for just four days to earn what a garment worker in Bangladesh will earn in an entire lifetime."

This is not the first time we've seen such numbers highlighting the world's sad economic situation. As I stared at these statistics, my mind tried to imagine the plight of the poor, and I couldn't help but wonder how even a small fraction of that 82% would change the lives of billions of poor people.

It was the only way I could interpret these tragic statistics, and that made me extremely sad. Then the thought came to me that the hyper-rich 1% also see this news, which they have seen before, and yet it has not sufficiently changed their ways. That thought made me feel helpless. I felt hopeless, too, that this widening gap between the rich and the poor will continue growing and that no one can stop it. I even questioned our very humanity, which allows these deep disparities to continue.

Then I decided that I would try to make this story not go away so fast. I decided to write about it, hoping to bring it to the attention of as many people as I can reach.

When I see these kinds of grim numbers, they bring to mind the words of Baha'u'llah:

Why, then, exhibit such greed in amassing the treasures of the earth, when your days are numbered and your chance is well-nigh lost? Will ye not, then, O heedless ones, shake off your slumber? – Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 127.

O Ye Rich Ones on Earth! The poor in your midst are My trust; guard ye My trust, and be not intent only on your own ease. – Baha'u'llah, *The Hidden Words*, p. 41.

One of the central principles of the Baha'i teachings—the elimination of the extremes of wealth and poverty—directly addresses this disturbing trend:

The inordinate disparity between rich and poor, a source of acute suffering, keeps the world in a state of instability, virtually on the brink of war. Few societies have dealt efficiently with this situation. The solution calls for the combined application of spiritual, moral and practical approaches. A fresh look at the problem is required, entailing consultation with experts from a wide spectrum of disciplines, devoid of economic and ideological polemics, and involving the people directly affected in the decisions that must urgently be made. It is an issue that is bound up not only with the necessity for eliminating extremes of wealth and poverty but also with those spiritual verities the understanding of which can produce a new universal attitude. Fostering such an attitude is itself a major part of the solution. – The Universal House of Justice, October 1985, *The Promise of World Peace*, p. 3.

There is not much that can be said about what this news and these statistics indicate. To me, they indicate a sick economic system that favours the rich and ignores the plight of the poor while humanity stands on the sidelines and watches it continue.

But the Baha'i teachings recommend a solution:

The fundamentals of the whole economic condition are divine in nature and are associated with the world of the heart and spirit. This is fully explained in the Baha'i teaching, and without knowledge of its principles no improvement in the economic state can be realised. The Baha'is will bring about this improvement and betterment but not through sedition and appeal to physical force—not through warfare, but welfare. Hearts must be so cemented together, love must become so dominant that the rich shall most willingly extend assistance to the poor and take steps to establish these economic adjustments permanently. If it is accomplished in this way, it will be most praiseworthy because then it will be for the sake of God and in the pathway of His service. For example, it will be as if the rich inhabitants of a city should say, "It is neither just nor lawful that we should possess great wealth while there is abject poverty in this community," and then willingly give their wealth to the poor, retaining only as much as will enable them to live comfortably. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, pp. 238-239.

I hope we soon wake up to the reality that we could be the instruments of the change the Baha'i teachings call for—and begin to act to make it a reality. Even small actions can instill this change by creating empathy for

the poor in our hearts and then doing all we can to remedy this grave injustice.

So here's a suggestion: don't let your social or economic class limit your horizons, your thinking or your relationships. Whether you're poor or rich, find a way to cross those economic barriers to meet and get to know people from other classes and conditions.

We all can make a difference by our actions, big or small. To stop this trend, we have to do some soul-searching and come to a course of action. We cannot close our eyes to these kinds of statistics and do nothing.

Are Economic and Political Changes Leading Us Towards a Global Government?

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, the world and our way of life have changed. New attitudes and a new way of thinking have to be adopted. What is happening has highlighted the plight of the poor and the need for the governments and other agencies to step up and do all they can to help — because this epidemic is killing more of the underprivileged and people living in poverty.

Many celebrities, sports figures, and other wealthy people have gotten their wake-up call and realized that there is more to life than accumulating wealth. Financial institutions have relaxed their lending rates and reduced credit card interest. There is a sense of unity even with some warring parties across the world. They have ceased fighting because they have found a bigger enemy in the virus. Though these attitudes have not come organically, they are welcome changes, and they make me happy in these stressful times.

It makes me happy because these are steps towards the right path. As Abdu'l-Baha, the son of Baha'u'llah, the Prophet-Founder of the Baha'i Faith, said in a speech in London in 1911:

The arrangements of the circumstances of the people must be such that poverty shall disappear, and that every one as far as possible, according to his position and rank, shall be comfortable. Whilst the nobles and others in high rank are in easy circumstances, the poor also should be able to get their daily food and not be brought to the extremities of hunger. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Abdu'l-Baha in London*

It is not just the ordinary and the rich who have re-examined their priorities. From the local to the international level, the leaders of all levels of government have started to see the world differently. They're changing their ideas and, more importantly, their vision to correspond with communities' new demands.

These changes have necessitated the need to do away with the old and narrow view of the past. Many people are instead sensing a need for an international body to coordinate the efforts and resources to ensure the welfare of the whole of humanity that has been so drastically affected.

To Baha'is, the world government has been foreseen, and its need is emphasized since it is an essential means of unifying humankind. Baha'u'llah wrote that:

The time must come when the imperative necessity for the holding of a vast, an all-embracing assemblage of men will be universally realized. The rulers and kings of the earth must needs attend it, and, participating in its deliberations, must consider such ways and means as will lay the foundations of the world's Great Peace amongst men. Such a peace demandeth that the Great Powers should resolve, for the sake of the tranquility of the peoples of the earth, to be fully reconciled among themselves. Should any king take up arms against another, all should unitedly arise and prevent him. If this be done, the nations of the world will no longer require any armaments, except for the purpose of preserving the security of their realms and of maintaining internal order within their territories. This will ensure the peace and composure of every people, government and nation. – *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*

The concept of world government has been envisioned by religions, philosophers, poets, writers and great enlightened men and women, but it has been a hard sell to the politicians. However, recent events have made experts and seasoned politicians raise the alarm for a need for universal efforts to deal with what we are experiencing.

"We face a crisis unlike any other. To overcome it, we must unite," António Guterres, the Secretary-General of the United Nations, said in a statement. Also, Guterres asked "for a global ceasefire to focus on our common enemy — the virus" and called for collective action. "Together, we will defeat this virus and rebuild a fairer world — as united global citizens and united nations."

Gordon Brown and Tony Blair, both ex-prime ministers of the United Kingdom, have called for a global fund to fight the spread of coronavirus and highlighted the need for a universal body to deal with it. Brown also called for a temporary global government to manage the medical and economic crises caused by the pandemic.

"We need some sort of working executive," Brown said. Recalling efforts to tackle the 2008 financial crisis, he added: "If I were doing it again, I would make the G20 a broader organization because in the current circumstances, you need to listen to the countries that are most affected, the countries that are making a difference and countries where there is the potential for a massive number of people to be affected — such as those in Africa."

For me, based on the Writings of the Baha'i Faith, there is only one solution: the unification of the world because united, we are stronger to face the challenges that the future has stored for us. May these challenges eventually lead us to a brighter future. As the Baha'i Writings tell us:

God grant that the people of the world may be graciously aided to preserve the light of His loving counsels within the globe of wisdom. We cherish the hope that everyone may be adorned with the vesture of true wisdom, the basis of the government of the world. – Baha'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*

Making Economics Serve Humanity

The recent pandemic has highlighted the glaring disparities in the economic system between the rich and the poor. On the one hand, we have the plight of poor people living under the poverty line and trying to survive the onslaught of miseries caused by financial hardship. In contrast, a small percentage of people continue to add billions to their already colossal wealth.

It upsets me because it looks like humanity has lost its consciousness and has become numb to the poor and underprivileged sufferings. I see the ever-widening gap between the poor and the rich getting wider and wider, yet there seems to be no solution in sight. That makes me more determined than ever to keep this issue alive and continue to address it.

I like to use the word "humanomics" to describe the solution to the inequalities in our economic system because a lack of humanity has been with the system since its inception and has had devastating effects on millions of lives.

Baha'u'llah, the prophet and founder of the Baha'i Faith taught us how to treat the poor. It is no wonder that he was called "Father of the Poor." He wrote:

Know ye that the poor are the trust of God in your midst. Watch that ye betray not His trust, that ye deal not unjustly with them and that ye walk not in the ways of the treacherous. Ye will most certainly be called upon to answer for His trust on the day when the Balance of Justice shall be set, the day when unto every one shall be rendered his due, when the doings of all men, be they rich or poor, shall be weighed.

The Baha'i Writings remind us to be aware of our role in taking care of the poor since our moral and spiritual duty is to protect and care for them. Baha'u'llah also wrote:

"**O Son of Man! Bestow My wealth upon My poor, that in heaven thou mayest draw from stores of unfading splendour and treasures of imperishable glory. But by My life! To offer up thy soul is a more glorious thing couldst thou but see with Mine eye.**

In addition to helping on an individual level, we need to change the economic system to make it more sensitive to people's needs and inject morality and spirituality into it to serve humanity rather than humanity being sacrificed to make the system work. We need Humanomics: a human system with human values and less of economics.

This can only be done by practicing truthfulness, trustworthiness, and other moral values in our actions, especially in our economic activities. These activities are not just economical but spiritual. In a talk in Boston in 1912, Abdu'l-Baha, the son of Baha'u'llah and his designated successor, explained that **"The fundamentals of the whole economic condition are divine in nature and are associated with the world of the heart and spirit."**
In 1935, Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith, further explained Abdu'l-Baha's meaning:

… By the statement 'the economic solution is divine in nature' is meant that religion alone can, in the last resort, bring in man's nature such a fundamental change as to enable him to adjust the economic relationships of society. It is only in this way that man can control the economic forces that threaten to disrupt the foundations of his existence, and thus assert his mastery over the forces of nature.

The economic problems of the world will not be solved if we do not change the system. The present financial system is a by-product of the old order and was built on wrong assumptions. It is assumed that people only think of their interests and do not concern themselves with others' plight. This assumption has been the engine for driving the system, and it has become a fertile ground for greed to spread in every aspect of human life. And we can see the result is the present economic injustices in the world.

The sad part about this is that every single day that this continues, thousands of people in the world will be dragged into a life full of economic challenges without any hope of remedy.

The essential element missing in the present economic system is justice, which has to be its foundation. Economic justice these days is the scarcest commodity in the world. In a talk in Montreal in 1912, Abdu'l-Baha told the audience:

We ask God to endow human souls with justice so that they may be fair, and may strive to provide for the comfort of all, that each member of humanity may pass his life in the utmost comfort and welfare. Then this material world will become the very paradise of the Kingdom, this elemental earth will be in a heavenly state, and all the servants of God will live in the utmost joy, happiness and gladness.

I feel that every individual is responsible for trying to do his or her utmost to lessen the burden of poverty from the shoulders of our fellow humans so that every person in the world has the economic means to live a comfortable and fulfilled life — which is a fundamental human right.

Though the possibility of the economic system becoming more humane looks like a far-fetched dream, if we desire it and strive to attain it by playing our small part, we can transform this rigid system, which is currently devoid of spirit, into a fantastic tool for the prosperity of humanity.

The Spiritual Cost of a Higher Standard of Living

Without a doubt, the standard of living has improved since the Industrial Revolution, particularly for many in the West.

A time not long ago, phones, colour TVs, and cars were only for the rich, and the poor could only dream of having them. But now, even poor people in developed nations own cell phones, colour TVs and computers.

Even children from poor or rich families, as early as the age of three or four, have cell phones and assorted sophisticated electronic toys. The adults also have their toys: airplanes, ride-on lawnmowers, boats and motorcycles.

The sad part about all these expensive toys: you do not have to have money to buy them because you can get a loan. With all our material possessions, we have come to believe we are better off than before and that we have improved the material quality of life. We think that acquiring more possessions will make us feel happier and more comfortable—but unbridled acquisition only starves the soul and makes us less and less happy. Our souls feel trapped in the clutter of material goods. The Baha'i teachings tell us:

All around us today we see how man surrounds himself with every modern convenience and luxury, and denies nothing to the physical and material side of his nature. But, take heed, lest in thinking too earnestly of the things of the body you forget the things of the soul: for material advantages do not elevate the spirit of a man. Perfection in worldly things is a joy to the body of a man but in no wise does it glorify his soul. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, pp. 62-63.

If we use happiness as a criterion, many of us have begun to realize that we are less happy despite our higher standard of living than people were before. Why?

Perhaps because the more we have, the harder we have to work to maintain that standard of living—and the more we work, the less time and energy we have to nurture our minds and our souls through meditation, reading books, playing music, painting, spending time with family and friends, and helping others. Those things can bring us true happiness, as Abdu'l-Baha explains:

If man is bereft of the divine bestowals and if his enjoyment and happiness are restricted to his material inclinations, what distinction or difference is there between the animal and himself? In fact, the animal's happiness is greater, for its wants are fewer and its means of livelihood easier to acquire. Although it is necessary for man to strive for material needs and comforts, his real need is the acquisition of the bounties of God. If he is bereft of divine bounties, spiritual susceptibilities and heavenly glad tidings, the life of man in this world has not yielded any worthy fruit. While possessing physical life, he should lay hold of the life spiritual, and together with bodily comforts and happiness, he should enjoy divine pleasures and content. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 335.

Almost all agree that our current economic system provides more goods and money—but having more may not necessarily be the best. The philosophy of "more is better" has led to a mentality of acquiring as many material goods as possible. That mentality has created a sickness in society that measures achievements on the basis of having more possessions and disregards the emotional and spiritual aspects of one's life.

This lack of spirituality is the root cause of most of the world's problems, and Baha'is are encouraged to introduce spirituality in any way possible into their economic activities. This can be as simple as saying a prayer for the poor or as grand as initiating a multi-billion dollar project to eliminate poverty or eradicate the disease. It could be by paying fair prices, avoiding wastage, being honest in insurance claims or giving to charitable funds.

Some mistake a higher standard of living for prosperity. To have more does not translate into being happier. According to the Legatum Prosperity Index, prosperity:

- Is a home to grow, to raise a family, a community where we belong, is people who care.
- Is compassion and generosity, is health, is education, is truth and integrity, in politics, in media, in business. Is peace and safety.
- Is in opportunity to work, earn, save, get ahead, innovate, take risks, succeed (or fail).
- Is freedom from hunger, disease, slavery, poverty, conflict, to speak our minds, to vote, to follow our beliefs. Is hope, space to breath and time to recharge and re create.
- Is becoming the best I can be and helping others to be the best they can be.

Baha'is believe in true prosperity and are aware of its greatest threat:

… true prosperity, the fruit of a dynamic coherence between the material and spiritual requirements of life, will recede further and further out of

reach as long as consumerism continues to act as opium to the human soul. – The Universal House of Justice, 2 March 2013.

The question remains: do we want a higher standard of living at any cost, or do we want true prosperity for ourselves and for all? The decision is ours, and the price to pay is ours, too.

How Much Profit Margin Do You Need, Anyway?

The world of economics is based on profit. Without it, there would be no motivation to start a business or company—the whole system would fail.

After all, why would anyone exert so much effort for no profit? Sure, a few people work for free, but their motivation is not to earn a livelihood. In today's world, competition has become so stiff that most companies employ consultants, research firms, agencies, and even psychologists to guide them in increasing their profits.

That's all well and good—but with the pressures in this materialistic world, the desire for profit can easily get out of hand and devolve into greed. When that happens, those in business want more and more and to get more, they lose their sense of reality and forget to ask themselves this question: "How much is enough?"

Most entrepreneurs and business owners can recall how little they expected as a return on their investment when they started their businesses. But sadly, as their businesses grew, their greed often grew with it, to the point that there was no limit to their desire for more profit. Unfortunately, as greed increases, it overshadows many of our human values and morals.

The Baha'i teachings recognize the concept of greed in a unique manner:

In the innate nature of things there is no evil—all is good. This applies even to certain apparently blameworthy attributes and dispositions which seem inherent in some people, but which are not in reality reprehensible. For example, you can see in a nursing child, from the beginning of its life, the signs of greed, of anger, and of ill temper; and so it might be argued that good and evil are innate in the reality of man, and that this is contrary to the pure goodness of the innate nature and of creation. The answer is that greed, which is to demand ever more, is a praiseworthy quality provided that it is displayed under the right circumstances. Thus, should a person show greed in acquiring science and knowledge, or in the exercise of compassion, high-mindedness, and justice, this would be most praiseworthy. And should he direct his anger and wrath against the bloodthirsty tyrants who are like ferocious beasts, this too would be most praiseworthy. But should he display these qualities under other conditions, this would be deserving of

blame. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Some Answered Questions*, newly revised edition, pp. 248-249.

Baha'u'llah warns us not to waste our lives on those blameworthy aspects of greed:

Why, then, exhibit such greed in amassing the treasures of the earth, when your days are numbered and your chance is well-nigh lost? Will ye not, then, O heedless ones, shake off your slumber? – Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, p. 127.

These Baha'i teachings clearly demonstrate how dangerous greed can be and how important it is to be aware of and resist this danger. This task becomes more significant because where there is greed, there is also envy—these two are closely related. To combat them, we need to increase our awareness by drawing strength from the world's great Faiths' spiritual teachings.

What's the opposite of greed? Contentment. The Oxford Dictionary definition of contentment is "a state of happiness and satisfaction." When you're content, you evince a mental or emotional state of satisfaction with life—you're at ease in your situation, body, mind, and soul.

A contented life is characterized by thanksgiving for what we have rather than moaning about what we don't have or what the advertisements or comparisons to our neighbours tell us we ought to have. Contentment directs our attention towards gratitude for what we have. If you have a house, a car or a business, be happy that you have them—since millions dream of having them. If you have a business that provides you with sufficient profit to live a comfortable life, be happy with that, rather than thinking you need more profit and more things. No matter how many possessions you accumulate or how much profit you make, if you are not satisfied with them, then your efforts will not give you peace of mind or peace in your heart:

Contentment is real wealth. If one develops within himself the quality of contentment, he will become independent. Contentment is the creator of happiness. When one is contented, he does not care either for riches or poverty. He lives above the influence of them and is indifferent to them. – Abdu'l-Baha, quoted in the diary of Ahmad Sohrab, *Star of the West*, Volume 5, p. 17.

Be content with what you have; rejoice in the way things are. When you realize there is nothing lacking, the whole world belongs to you. – Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching, Ch. 44.

So if you run a business, be content with a reasonable margin of profit. Being satisfied with earning a just enough profit will create a sense of contentment and provide an example to others. It will also gradually increase your business volume because those who are satisfied with a lower profit margin can offer lower prices.

It takes great strength and inner conviction to be satisfied and content with a set amount of profit—but doing so leads to a peaceful heart and the heavenly feeling of contentment that greed can never offer.

Why the Lessons of COVID-19 Give Me Hope for Global Unity

When I was a child, my parents taught me that the goal of my faith, the Baha'i Faith, was the oneness of humanity, and my primary duty was to serve humanity in achieving that goal. Even as a child, I understood working was important and thought everyone would see it that way. To motivate me, I memorized quotes about unity from Baha'u'llah, the prophet and founder of the Baha'i Faith, such as these:

'Ye are all the leaves of one tree and the drops of one ocean."

"Be ye as the fingers of one hand, the members of one body."

Soon, society taught me that these ideas were just for dreamers who do not understand people's lives and real problems in the world. As I grew older, though, I never questioned my goal. I became more and more aware of the obstacles. I knew that there were serious problems, but I believed that solutions could be found if humanity would really try.

There are many reasons humanity has chosen to ignore poverty and eradicate diseases, just to name two. The main reason is the lack of willingness, even though all the great religions, poets, and thinkers have advocated the need throughout the ages. I saw this reasoning as an excuse for not even attempting to change things.

Without getting into its politics, I've been focused on the will to find a cure. The way the world has dealt with COVID-19 by finding a vaccine in a short time has proved that when we want something badly, we will find a way to get it no matter how hard it is.

Despite serious problems in finding a cure for COVID-19 and manufacturing a vaccine, observing the efficiency with which different governments communicated and shared information was amazing. How quickly all the barriers and obstacles were removed! How the world's governments cooperated and, more importantly, worked willingly with vaccine-making companies.

Governments went out of their way to be at the service and wishes of the vaccine manufacturers. On the part of manufacturers, they cut red tape, streamlined all their processes, and swiftly came up with an effective

vaccine. It is historical what they have achieved and how quickly they have produced it and tested it.

As the vaccines were being developed, the most impressive deliberations were discussions about how the world's developing nations should not be left behind regarding access to the vaccine and the need for its affordability. That demonstrated a consciousness and sympathy for the nations that do not have the technology or the financial resources. We have proven that humankind can deal with and overcome huge problems when we tap into our humanity and solve the issues that threaten the world.

As Abdu'l-Baha, the son of Baha'u'llah and his designated successor, explained during a talk in 1912 in New York City:

It is self-evident that humanity is at variance. Human tastes differ; thoughts, native lands, races and tongues are many. The need of a collective center by which these differences may be counterbalanced and the people of the world be unified is obvious. Consider how nothing but a spiritual power can bring about this unification, for material conditions and mental aspects are so widely different that agreement and unity are not possible through outer means. It is possible, however, for all to become unified through one spirit, just as all may receive light from one sun. Therefore, assisted by the collective and divine center which is the law of God and the reality of His Manifestation, we can overcome these conditions until they pass away entirely and the races advance.

The time has come to understand that humanity's oneness is not a dream or empty slogan but instead an essential element for facing our problems. We need to continue to unite using an international approach rather than a narrow view of nationalism. This pandemic, like the issue of the environment, made boundaries between countries irrelevant. If we widen our horizons, it will not be at the cost of love for our country. It shows that we love our country and want it to prosper and thrive along with the rest of the world. As Baha'u'llah wrote nearly 150 years ago, **"Glory not in love for your country, but in love for all mankind."**

The urgent task now is to bring the world's attention to the importance and urgency of uniting as one human family so that we can deal with the challenges facing us with our collective energies. It is clear that many world problems would not have started if there had been unity and cooperation between people and the world's governments.

The Universal House of Justice, the democratically elected global governing body of the Baha'i Faith, beautifully explains it:

The welfare of any segment of humanity is inextricably bound up with the welfare of the whole. Humanity's collective life suffers when any one group thinks of its own well-being in isolation from that of its neighbours' or pursues economic gain without regard for how the natural environment, which provides sustenance for all, is affected. A stubborn obstruction, then, stands in the way of meaningful social progress: time and again, avarice and self-interest prevail at the expense of the common good.
Unconscionable quantities of wealth are being amassed, and the instability this creates is made worse by how income and opportunity are spread so unevenly both between nations and within nations. But it need not be so. However much such conditions are the outcome of history, they do not have to define the future, and even if current approaches to economic life satisfied humanity's stage of adolescence, they are certainly inadequate for its dawning age of maturity. There is no justification for continuing to perpetuate structures, rules, and systems that manifestly fail to serve the interests of all peoples.

The Creator of the universe wishes its people to live in harmony and peace. The time has come to accept this vital fact that the world's survival and prosperity depend on its people's unity. Science and technology have created the tools for the unification of the world, and this pandemic proved how closely we are connected and how we are in it together. Technology has removed the physical barriers, and now we need to remove the barriers in our hearts and minds and see ourselves as one race, one people, and one family.

Is ‘Fighting’ a Problem the Best Way to Deal with it?

There comes a time when, as human beings, we are powerless to solve some of our problems. The question remains: how do we want to deal with them? Having seen my loved ones going through cancer, the words “fighting cancer” have really struck a chord.

When we talk about ending the world’s injustices — poverty, racism, and sexism, we tend to use the same language. We often say we are “fighting” these things. And we absolutely should do everything we can to end these social and spiritual ills and ensure humanity's unity, peace, and prosperity. Indeed,
the Baha’i writings tell us, “**The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice**.”

The question in my mind is, is “fighting” the only way to face the problems given to us??

I understand that anger can be the first reaction in grasping the reality of what has happened, and it is natural to react with rage for a short time. But, scientific research shows that allowing this emotion to dominate for long periods has a negative effect on the body.

Common sense and the law of karma (for those who believe in it) encourage us to live positively since whatever energy we put into the universe will eventually return to us. You are what you think. Fighting needs anger, and when we are sick, we need peace more than anger because so much needs our attention. The Baha’i writings tell us, “**Let nothing grieve thee, and be thou angered at none**.” But that, of course, does not mean being passive in the face of illness or injustice.

I wonder if there are other ways of approaching these situations rather than dealing with them with so much anger, especially since anger and high anxiety are the last things that the body and soul need.

When one of my most cherished friends got cancer, she was given little chance of surviving. She deliberately used the word “dealing” rather than “fighting” when talking about her condition.

Humanity has had to face many difficulties throughout the ages, such as fighting big animals in the Stone Age or enemies during the great wars in our history. We needed a fighting mentality that gave us motivation or the force to overcome adverse situations.

We live in a different world, and our awareness has dramatically improved. We know what our bodies and souls need to gain the strength to overcome or deal with difficult situations in life.

We know that peace of mind through meditation and prayers is an essential tool to solve life-threatening problems. They give us guidance and strength to empower ourselves to follow a healthy diet of food and exercise and research other medical treatments to help us overcome the disease. There is a wealth of writings that guide us in approaching tests and dealing with them.

Baha'u'llah, the prophet and founder of the Baha'i Faith tells us to see the tragedies of life with a spiritual eye. He wrote: **"My Calamity is my providence, outwardly it is fire and vengeance, but inwardly it is light and mercy."**

I know so many cancer survivors (including my dear friend) and survivors of accidents and other tragedies. When asked what helped them, mostly they mentioned prayer and their family and friends' good wishes that gave them the strength to deal with these challenges.

This logic helps me see the situation with a better frame of mind and soul to face the challenges that will always be part of our lives. Sometimes, our language reflects our mentality. When we want to fight, we are angry. When we want to do our best, it may reflect a sense of serenity and acceptance.

We can also consider the "Will of God" and whether we should learn about it. I believe that it is a critical approach that some have found useful to help them to do the things within their powers and be detached from the outcome. Following this practice has created great contentment in me since I am satisfied that I have played my part and acknowledged that my efforts are not the only deciding factor. It can enable us to continue our efforts to serve humanity by relying on a higher power for assistance. As Baha'u'llah wrote:

"Wert thou to consider this world, and realize how fleeting are the things that pertain unto it, thou wouldst choose to tread no path except the path of service to the Cause of thy Lord. None would have the power to deter thee from celebrating His praise, though all men should arise to oppose thee."

I hope we can become more aware of our limited powers and use them wisely with a more mature and peaceful approach. The world is full of wars and can do without my declaration of war on a disease or ideology. We need a new race of men and women who will do everything to bring justice and unity and spend those energies educating themselves and others.

3 Spiritual Ways to Avoid Financial Regrets

As I get older, I spend more time reflecting on my life—on the right choices I've made and the regrets about the wrong choices I could have avoided.

This reflection often takes me back to my youth's innocence and ignorance and what I could have done differently, knowing what I know now. How deeply I wish someone had guided me to the ideas that would have helped me have fewer regrets.

So, I'll try to reach out here with a reminder and a few tips that will hopefully help reduce the percentage of your regrets in those later years:

1. Know Yourself—then Plan for Your Economic Needs

To have a plan or a goal, one has to know for whom they are planning. When we plan for ourselves, we should first know who we are—and ask ourselves: What is the purpose of our lives? The Baha'i writings are very clear about those fundamental questions:

… man should know his own self and recognize that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement, wealth or poverty. – Baha'u'llah, *Tablets of Baha'u'llah*, p. 34.

One must remember that the purpose of this life is to prepare the soul for the next. – The Universal House of Justice, *Lights of Guidance*, p. 359.

After answering those fundamental questions, you'll need to find the answer to a second big question: What do I want? Examining who you are will help you answer what you want.

What we want applies not just to our spiritual needs and aspirations—it means deciding the financial needs we require to live a fulfilling life. Contrary to popular opinion, because our materialistic culture has convinced them that you can never have too much money, many people accumulate wealth thousands of times more than their needs. They spend all their energies to get more, while the spiritual elements of life pass them by due to their preoccupation with gathering and managing wealth. Can you imagine a sadder tragedy when we know we do not live on this Earth forever and our days are numbered? The wisdom of the Baha'i teachings advises us to:

Live then the days of thy life, that are less than a fleeting moment, with thy mind stainless, thy heart unsullied, thy thoughts pure, and thy nature sanctified, so that, free and content, thou mayest put away this mortal frame, and repair unto the mystic paradise and abide in the eternal kingdom for evermore. – Baha'u'llah, *The Hidden Words*, p. 37.

2. Make a Sound Financial Plan—Spiritually

With the pressure of the world's many problems weighing on us, we all need financial and spiritual guidance. People are looking everywhere to find solutions to problems that have baffled them and made experts confused and helpless. Even economics can't escape this problem because so many economists have completely removed all moral and spiritual values from the economic system. The Baha'i teachings clearly explain where to look for the solutions:

The secrets of the whole economic question are Divine in nature, and are concerned with the world of the heart and spirit. In the Baha'i Teachings this is most completely explained, and without the consideration of the Baha'i Teachings, it is impossible to bring about a better state. – Abdu'l-Baha, *The Baha'i World*, Volume 4, p. 448.

When we recognize that economics is not simply material but "divine in nature," as Abdu'l-Baha said, we can then construct a sound financial plan for our lives. To do so, we must plan for financial goals that support our physical existence and smooth the path of spiritual growth.

3. Plan not Only for Yourself but for the Poor

Baha'u'llah's message of the oneness of humankind implies the prosperity of all human beings, along with the continuing prosperity and stewardship of the Earth that supports us all. That was his wish and his command, and he entrusted taking care of the poor and needy to all of us:

O ye rich ones on earth! The poor in your midst are My trust; guard ye My trust, and be not intent only on your own ease. – Baha'u'llah, *The Hidden Words of Baha'u'llah*, p. 41.

Reducing the sufferings of the poor whose welfare has been entrusted to us may seem a small task, and this task should have been easily achieved by now, yet every day, more and more people are becoming poor, destitute and homeless. Why? Because an insufficient number of people plan beyond their own self-interests and think of others. Some, of course, think about the poor but do nothing about their plight:

We know that to help the poor and to be merciful is good and pleases God, but knowledge alone does not feed the starving man, nor can the poor be warmed by knowledge or words in the bitter winter; we must give the practical help of loving-kindness. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Abdu'l-Baha in London*, p. 60.

The end result: the global problem of the great extremes of poverty and wealth threatens our civilization's foundation. If we do not try to take care of the trust that has been given by God to us, how can we have peace of mind?

The feeling of reaching out to others and considering them as members of one's family changes our outlook, and that process leads to a better view of the world and our role in it. This gives the mind and soul a sense of peace. If everyone in the world yearns for peace of mind, then helping the poor can help you get there. You don't have to be wealthy to help; everyone can contribute, no matter how small.

In our next journey, none of us will need money. The material world dies the moment we die. The only reality left at that point is the inner spiritual qualities we have been able to gain through our hard work, meditation, service and sacrifice.

That's the essence of true planning for the future—ensuring you have sufficient material resources for retirement and the spiritual resources you'll need for your eternal existence. How sad to reach the end of our physical journey and realize that we have not accumulated enough for the next one because we were distracted, overwhelmed and obsessed by the material world and forgot to put away something for our spiritual journey:

Ye are even as the bird which soareth, with the full force of its mighty wings and with complete and joyous confidence, through the immensity of the heavens, until, impelled to satisfy its hunger, it turneth longingly to the water and clay of the earth below it, and, having been entrapped in the mesh of its desire, findeth itself impotent to resume its flight to the realms whence it came. Powerless to shake off the burden weighing on its sullied wings, that bird, hitherto an inmate of the heavens, is now forced to seek a dwelling-place upon the dust. Wherefore, O My servants, defile not your wings with the clay of waywardness and vain desires, and suffer them not to be stained with the dust of envy and hate, that ye may not be hindered from soaring in the heavens of My divine knowledge. – Baha'u'llah, *Gleanings From the Writings of Baha'u'llah*, pp. 327-328.

The Baha'i teachings guide us toward finding the true purpose of our lives. They constantly remind us to stay on course, not be distracted by the

temptations of this transient world, and prepare our souls for the moment of our birth into the next stage of our spiritual life.

Why We Can't Forget the Pandemic's Hard-Earned Lessons

Some countries are gradually lifting COVID-19 restrictions, and we hope that life will get back to normal soon, but what will that new "normal" look like?

As painful and challenging as the pandemic is, it has brought many issues to the forefront for humanity to ponder and resolve. We obviously haven't adequately dealt with those issues in the past. But as people speak about going back to "business as usual" when we can fully stop fearing COVID-19, I worry that the lessons the pandemic brought will be soon forgotten.

Human Fragility — and Our Spiritual Resilience

The COVID crisis has shown us that we are not invincible. No matter how many inventions and discoveries we make or how many gadgets we create to make life more convenient, we cannot protect ourselves from future pandemics that will kill millions of people if we do not come together and overcome our differences. A tiny virus, we now know, could jeopardize the survival of humanity. That stark fact has created a rude awakening for many.

However, the pandemic also proved the ingenuity and resilience of the human spirit gifted to us by God as we rushed to heal the sick, create and distribute vaccines, and support each other through a global economic crisis.

This resilience had helped humanity progress since the very beginning of our species when we faced fierce animals, survived famines, and endured wars. The human spirit can solve problems no matter how difficult and complex they are. Abdu'l-Baha, the son and successor of the prophet and founder of the Baha'i Faith, Baha'u'llah, wrote:

Do ye not look upon the beginning of the affairs; attach your hearts to the ends and results. The present period is like unto the sowing time. Undoubtedly it is impregnated with perils and difficulties, but in the future many a harvest shall be gathered and benefits and results will become apparent. When one considers the issue and the end, exhaustless joy and happiness will dawn.

The Beauty and Tenderness of Humanity

We took many things for granted until the pandemic reminded us how vital they are for our emotional and physiological well-being.

For me, the biggest loss was the smiles. I love smiling and joked about how my smiles were wasted since nobody saw them under my mask. It was such a tragedy not to touch or hug our loved ones, and I hope that we never forget how essential that is for our happiness.

As we realized that there are other things in life, money became less important. We became less concerned with physical appearances. Seeing so many singers that I admired sing in virtual concerts without the tools to enhance the quality of their voices was interesting. I could listen to and appreciate their natural voices more than the professionally produced versions. Hopefully, this time has helped us accept ourselves and others as we are.

The Importance of Nature

This lesson was interesting for two reasons: one, it affirmed the benefits of nature's healing powers for humans' psyche and happiness; two, it reminded us of the power of nature to heal itself. During the pandemic, nature made a remarkable recovery, proving that we can solve our environmental crisis if we take steps to reduce our carbon footprint.

I hope that seeing these changes has made us more sensitive to nature's needs and motivated us to try to protect our environment before it is too late. The Baha'i writings say:

The elements and lower organisms are synchronized in the great plan of life. Shall man, infinitely above them in degree, be antagonistic and a destroyer of that perfection?

"We're In This Together"

Ordinary people and politicians repeated this phrase time and again. Some used it as a slogan without fully understanding its implications.

The pandemic exposed, to a greater degree, the disparities in opportunity, healthcare, and financial security between communities of different races and genders in the workforce. People of color suffered a greater infection rate and the greatest economic devastation, on top of a new wave of racially-motivated violence in the United States, while women were forced to abandon the workforce at a greater rate than men. While we should have all been in this together, many found themselves at a disadvantage. Supporters of change convey

that the time of talking has passed, and we need to take action to correct past errors.

We also learned that we cannot depend on national boundaries to solve the problem of the pandemic. Although we put restrictions in place for movement, they exist because we all know that as long as the whole world isn't vaccinated, the problem will not be solved.

We have lost so much during this pandemic. Millions of lives were cut short. Billions of dollars have been spent, and more will be spent on economic recovery. There are emotional scars to heal. It would be even more tragic if all the suffering goes for nought and the lessons are forgotten.

The Importance of Prayer and Meditation

During the toughest moments of the pandemic, many of us found solace in prayer and reconnected with our meditation routines. Many adopted meditation into their daily lives or strongly felt the need for prayers for their spiritual health — even those who had not considered prayer as an option for their spiritual health before.

For me, meditation and prayer became an essential part of my daily routine. These words by Abdu'l-Baha reassured me and helped me see the light at the end of the tunnel as I strived to function with a positive attitude:

The darkness of this gloomy night shall pass away. Again the Sun of Reality will dawn from the horizon of the hearts. Have patience, wait but do not sit idle; work while you are waiting; smile when you are wearied with monotony; be firm while everything around you is being shaken; be joyous while the ugly face of despair grins at you; speak aloud while the malevolent forces of the nether world try to crush your mind; be valiant and courageous while men all around you are cringing with fear and cowardice … Continue your journey to the end. The bright day is coming.

The suddenness of the pandemic and the speed with which it spread made us realize how uncertain life is and how, in no time, our world can drastically change. It has given us a hint of the problems that could develop if countries do not work together to solve problems, leaving behind political and financial greed, and showed us how we might prepare for such events in the future.

I hope that, even if we fully return to "normal" soon, we can carry these lessons with us so that tragedy may be averted and we can create a more peaceful, unified world.

Why Can't We Combine the Best of Socialism and Capitalism?

Lately, I've been surprised at our culture's heated discussions over socialism and capitalism. Mostly, the arguments seem politically motivated – so let's try to get past the political spin to the actual facts.

At the outset, I should mention that, as a Baha'i, I do not take part in or interfere with partisan politics. From a Baha'i perspective, which emphasizes the unity of humanity, it bothers me to see that many valid and beneficial elements of these two economic systems have been ignored due mostly to differing political views.

As an economist, I see some good in each system. As a Baha'i, I would love to see humanity combine the best elements of socialism and capitalism in the interests of re-adjusting the world's economic systems, as Abdu'l-Baha, the son and successor of Baha'u'llah, the founder of the Baha'i Faith, suggested:

The readjustment of the economic laws for the livelihood of man must be effected in order that all humanity may live in the greatest happiness according to their respective degrees.

In my opinion, a combination of the two would provide a workable solution for a healthy economic system where individual freedom is respected and at the same time, social issues such as poverty are approached more effectively.

Socialism and Capitalism: the Conventional Wisdom

Here's the conventional wisdom: from a capitalist point of view, socialism is evil and against the spirit of human rights, suffocating individual initiative and freedom. Those who support socialism, on the other hand, blame corruption, extreme wealth, and greed as the products of capitalism and their root cause for much of human suffering.

The truth must sit somewhere in the middle of those polarized viewpoints since no ideology or concept is without its merits. So, let's examine the two ideologies in a different way: by looking at their benefits.

For those who don't fully understand what capitalism and socialism stand for, very briefly and in a simple way without getting technical, I'll attempt to explain these two systems by drawing attention to their main features. Hopefully, by

throwing a little light on these concepts, we can all be in a better position to judge them without depending on the misinformation supplied by opposite parties.

Socialism

Simply put, socialism is a populist economic and political system based on public ownership, like collective or shared ownership of the means of production. Socialists believe that shared ownership of resources and central planning provides an equitable distribution of goods and services and a more equal society. Governments' role and control of the system's workings is a vital feature of the socialistic pattern of an economic system.

The Baha'i writings support the idea and importance of socialism – if done in a democratic way and in a voluntary spirit, without involuntary wealth redistribution, force, or compulsion. History shows that the use of force achieved some socialist ideals of equality, but at the cost of individual rights. Abdu'l-Baha, in a speech he gave in the United States in 1912, explained:

The question of socialization is very important. It will not be solved by strikes for wages …In the Bolshevistic principles equality is effected through force. The masses who are opposed to the people of rank and to the wealthy class desire to partake of their advantages.
But in the divine teachings equality is brought about through a ready willingness to share. It is commanded as regards wealth that the rich among the people, and the aristocrats should, by their own free will and for the sake of their own happiness, concern themselves with and care for the poor. This equality is the result of the lofty characteristics and noble attributes of mankind.

Socialism puts great emphasis on social programs and services for society's poorest people. The original teachings of most religions encourage some form of socialism.

Capitalism

In the simplest terms, capitalism is an economic system in which private individuals own and control property according to their interests. Demand and supply freely set prices in capitalist markets in a way presumed to serve the best interests of society. The main feature of capitalism is self-interest, which impels each person to make a profit. In that system, governments are expected not to interfere with the economic system's functioning.

A pure capitalist system gives freedom to all and seeks only to maximize profits. This has led to some individuals achieving unprecedented financial success and extreme wealth – but has also become a breeding ground for greed, with no

concern for the less fortunate people, leading to a system of "haves" and "have-nots" that tends to produce great extremes of wealth and poverty.

The Baha'i teachings again support some aspects of capitalism, provided that some of its elements are changed to make it more effectively serve society. The Guardian of the Baha'i Faith, Shoghi Effendi, said: **"There is nothing in the [Baha'i] teachings against some kind of Capitalism; its present form, though, would require adjustments to be made."**

Seeking Truth and Moderation in Economics

The independent investigation of the truth, one of the fundamental principles of the Baha'i Faith, compels me to try to find the merits of these two economic systems and see the possibility of combining these two ideologies that are so important for the progress of humanity – all while recognizing the need for moderation, as Abdu'l-Baha expressed:

… the best course is therefore to seek moderation, which is for the wealthy to recognize the advantages of moderation in the acquisition of profits and to show regard for the welfare of the poor and the needy …

It does not matter what religion or political party we belong to; most of us want to reduce poverty, increase opportunity, and solve other economic issues. The capitalists have their solutions, and socialists have theirs, yet the problems remain unresolved – and have even worsened. Today, the widening gap between the rich and the poor threatens us all.

I hope that one day, we can put the differences aside and return to the fundamental needs of humanity by focusing on the welfare of all, regardless of the method.

The Baha'i teachings can guide us to combine the best concepts, discard the negatives, and use them to satisfy the world's needs. Capitalists have the freedom to build businesses and factories and be successful in generating wealth. The rest of society can play its part and contribute as long as every community member can live in comfort and share the benefit of each other's efforts.

Maybe after the bitter experience of the pandemic, humanity has reached an excellent time to re-examine the definitions of these two systems and remove the misunderstanding and political prejudices that have labelled them. Perhaps we can accept the merits of both systems and combine them into a highly efficient system that will remedy the economic ills afflicting humanity.

Five Ways to Optimize the Powerful Tool of Baha'i Consultation

The Baha'i writings offer a treasury of insight and meaning on the complex subject of consultation – including this quotation from the writings of Baha'u'llah, the prophet and founder of the Baha'i Faith:

Consultation bestoweth greater awareness and transmuteth conjecture into certitude. It is a shining light which, in a dark world, leadeth the way and guideth. For everything there is and will continue to be a station of perfection and maturity. The maturity of the gift of understanding is made manifest through consultation.

Baha'i consultation is an acquired skill, so I try to visualize it in a way that I can understand. I imagine a filtration system where impurities come through the system, and the water that carries them is filtered, cleansed, and purified. The outcome: something beautiful.

My metaphor for consultation oversimplifies the concept – entire books have been written on it, and many will be written about consultation's vital toolkit for the progress of humanity. I'll attempt to explain it briefly.

What Is Baha'i Consultation?

Baha'is use the tool of consultation to conduct discussion, discourse, and even administrative meetings. Essentially, it's a decision-making tool that relies on seeking many people's views rather than just one. Rather than simply expressing personal opinions, those who consult together attempt to build a sense of fellowship, mutuality, love, harmony, and unity. Together, they resolve to search for the truth by freely expressing their opinions and then weighing all their views dispassionately. Once an idea is put forth, it becomes the property of the group, not an individual's. No one belittles the thoughts of anyone else.

The Baha'i teachings say that decisions made during consultation, with harmony, purity of motive, and love, will attract divine assistance and, in the words of Abdu'l-Baha, "**causeth the living waters to flow in the meadows of man's reality**…"

But to my simple mind, consultation represents a unique filtration system, a spiritual filter for those "living waters" in which we bring all our strengths and weaknesses as input. When we consult, we enter the discussion from different

backgrounds, with differing baggage, quirkiness, cultures, attitudes, and knowledge.

Of course, the ideas come from our different approaches, which, when first examined, rarely look like they match each other. Still, as the consultative process continues, the impurities get left behind just like a filtration system. When that happens, people start seeing the validity in each other's points of view and discarding the inadequacies not related to that topic. If spiritual Baha'i consultation is done correctly, it becomes that unique filtration system that takes all impurities and harmful elements and makes the outcome pure.

However, the purity of this consultation and its result depends on the purity of motives and our approach to the task. We can do many things to not tax this system, hinder its efficiency, and make the process efficient and easy. Preparation, both spiritually and materially, is essential for consultation to work.

I'll suggest a few ideas that have made the consultative process more efficient for me – and have increased the purity of the consultation's filtration system:

1. Dealing with the ego – the "insistent self"

No matter how we succeed spiritually, intellectually, or materially in science, arts, sports, business or any other field, the greatest enemy within us presents a constant danger – our own ego.

It can manifest itself in the form of a gesture, a look, a word, or an action, but the result is often the same. Our egos are always with us, like a volcano ready to erupt. They need to be constantly supervised by our higher nature.

The Baha'i Faith has numerous teachings and writings to prepare us to face and handle this daily test. The writings differentiate between our two selves: our animal, material or lower nature and our spiritual, divine or higher nature. In consultation, nothing can pollute the process of the discussion more than the lower nature's ego – than its attachment to its own viewpoints, ideas, and preconceptions. When we work on our egos and keep them in check with the oversight of our higher spiritual natures, our attachment to our opinions and ideas will gradually diminish. In his mystical book *The Hidden Words*, Baha'u'llah **wrote,** "**Loose thy soul from the prison of self.**"

2. Prayers

Consultation requires preparing spiritually by praying and meditating before any discussion occurs. There are so many writings and books on its powers, effects and benefits. Abdu'l-Baha, the son and successor of Baha'u'llah, gave us the gist of it, when he said that prayer and meditation: "**… creates spirituality, creates**

mindfulness and celestial feelings, begets new attractions of the Kingdom and engenders the susceptibilities of the higher intelligence."

3. Self-knowledge

Knowing ourselves can produce many benefits, both material and spiritual. When we know why we do things, we understand our actions. Besides helping us manage our ego, self-knowledge can help us be aware of our strengths and weaknesses. Baha'u'llah wrote, "**True loss is for him whose days have been spent in utter ignorance of his self.**"

4. Love

Love is the best lubricant for the practice of true consultation. Love is the link that connects us to God, to ourselves and others. Love makes its functions effortless. There is no end to love's powers and usefulness. In a talk he gave in Paris, Abdu'l-Baha said: "**… in the world of existence there is indeed no greater power than the power of love. When the heart of man is aglow with the flame of love, he is ready to sacrifice all – even his life.**"

5. Humility

We sometimes misunderstand humility, thinking of it as a lack of determination, but really, it is the freedom from pride and arrogance. True humility – an extension of self-awareness and self-knowledge – gives us a powerful way to connect with others and see our own opinions in the proper perspective. Baha'u'llah wrote, "**Humility exalteth man to the heaven of glory and power, whilst pride abaseth him to the depths of wretchedness and degradation.**"

If consultation is understood and carried out effectively, then we can be confident that we cannot find a better filtration system for conducting our discussions. Baha'i consultation combines the best of human abilities and our spiritual values, all gifted to us by the Creator to solve the problems challenging humanity.

Trauma: How Can We Heal Our Wounded Souls?

You've likely heard of PTSD – post-traumatic stress disorder – but have you heard yet about PCSD? That acronym stands for post-Covid stress disorder, a newly-emerging effect of the pandemic.

Increasingly, mental health professionals are recognizing that the global Covid-19 pandemic has wounded the entire world's emotions. Our souls suffer from that trauma. That seems logical since millions have died from the disease, and billions are at risk, causing severe stress, anxiety, depression, and fear.

Do you feel it? Most people do, and it has led to a wider recognition of the role trauma plays in

The Impact of Mental Trauma

Many societies around the world have begun to recognize the impact of mental trauma, no matter the cause. Athletes who have recently withdrawn from the Olympics and other events emphasize the importance of their emotional health and well-being by highlighting the stress they feel. This is a healthy sign – their withdrawal from these events sends a signal that emotional health is more important than fame, medals, and trophies and gives more people permission to recognize their own trauma.

Some religions claim that psychological injury or illness can only be addressed and treated by spiritual teachings and even discourage or prohibit their followers from seeking medical or psychological advice – but the Baha'i principles encourage everyone to obtain and follow guidance from competent medical and psychiatric professionals. In accordance with the core Baha'i teaching of the agreement of science and religion, Abdu'l-Baha, Baha'u'llah's son and successor, wrote that everyone should "**maintain your health by consulting with a highly-skilled physician**:"

According to the explicit decree of Bahá'u'lláh one must not turn aside from the advice of a competent doctor. It is imperative to consult one even if the patient himself be a well-known and eminent physician. In short, the point is that you should maintain your health by consulting a highly-skilled physician.

Medical science has made tremendous achievements in curing our physical diseases, but sadly we have little advanced understanding of the causes of mental

and emotional ills. However, with greater knowledge of the brain's functioning in the future, we will hopefully have a better chance of receiving the correct remedies for the myriad of mental illnesses and traumas people experience.

Humanity has long dealt with emotional issues at every level in every profession, but the general advice so far has been to "toughen up." That approach, which means failing to recognize and then forcibly moving on through the pain and stress, simply doesn't work. Of course, to achieve a goal in life, one must expend effort, go through some difficulties and stress, and make sacrifices. The question is, to what extent do the limits of emotional endurance have to be pushed to achieve those goals?

We have made heroes of people who ignored extreme stresses and pains to achieve their goals, but few cared enough to find out later about the emotional and psychological cost of that course of action. What price did those people pay for their bodies and their emotional health?

Medicating Emotional Problems

One of the few currently available alternatives to just ignoring the inner pain of trauma – psychoactive medications – has helped many. So far, in our fairly limited knowledge of how to treat psychological and emotional trauma, the remedies have generally involved pills of different varieties for every disorder. In many instances, individuals consult professionals who prescribe medications along with their counselling sessions. Some of these medications work well, but others have significant side effects and may ultimately create more problems than they solve.

During my work in the public school system, it surprised me that many students who could not cope with the system were given medicine to calm them down. Sadly, many of them behaved like zombies after taking those medications, which left them without sufficient energy or drive to accomplish anything.

The reality is that emotional health is very complicated. Many experts are looking for solutions, but we have not yet progressed to the point that we know how to determine the root cause of emotional issues, so, in the meantime, we resort to medicines that may be band-aid solutions. Thankfully, there is increased awareness in this field, more books have been written, and more support groups are created every day. Significant improvements have been made in finding new ways to discuss and tackle these issues.

Spiritual Treatment for Trauma

Based on this Baha'i quotation, though, some people may be better served by treating them spiritually rather than medically:

Illnesses which occur by reason of physical causes should be treated by doctors with medical remedies; those which are due to spiritual causes disappear through spiritual means. Thus an illness caused by affliction, fear, nervous impressions, will be healed more effectively by spiritual rather than by physical treatment.

So far Western medicine has mostly avoided treating these kinds of afflictions with anything but medication. However, we need to further explore the spiritual methods and solutions for these problems, like counselling, consultation, and other kinds of more spiritually-based therapies. If we do not approach these challenges with the right tools, the present solutions may end up as good attempts but failures nevertheless.

There is no doubt that medical sciences have made significant progress, and the result is the increase in the life span and eradication of many diseases that in the past would lead to death or a life of great pain. There are now so many ways to make every part of the body function better, correct difficulties, and, in some cases, even replace afflicted body parts.

But it is time to face trauma and the emotional issues it produces with a new and different approach – to acknowledge that the root cause of many of these issues is spiritual and then introduce spiritual methods to permanently deal with them. For example – we now have countless proven and effective methods of relaxation and meditation in every corner of the world based on some ancient philosophies, traditions and religions. New techniques are also being invented every day. Thanks to social media, they are easily accessible in the comforts of our homes.

In many Indigenous cultures, this sort of spiritual healing is an accepted part of any treatment plan for trauma. In Navajo culture, for example, a spiritual healing ceremony called a sing is often held for returning war veterans to heal their spirits from what they encountered in combat.

Prayers are essential for any healing. The Baha'i teachings offer many different prayers for physical and psychological healing. This one, from Baha'u'llah, comes from a tablet he wrote to a physician:

Thy name is my healing, O my God, and remembrance of Thee is my remedy. Nearness to Thee is my hope, and love for Thee is my companion. Thy mercy to me is my healing and my succor in both this world and the world to come. Thou, verily, art the All-Bountiful, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.

Sometimes, it helps to trust our faith in a higher power, do the best we can, and detach ourselves from the outcomes. This process can create a higher level of contentment, which is essential to appreciating our blessings of the things that we have rather than the things that we do not have and desire.

Physical and emotional illnesses require great efforts to overcome, and having patience is a great asset to face these challenges. Improvements in health or life take time, and patience helps survive the difficulties one day at a time.

Most emotional problems can be remedied temporarily with the help of medicine, but the question remains whether they sufficiently address the origin or the causes of these issues. The future direction of solutions to mental and emotional challenges is essential for humanity's happiness, well-being, and progress. We have to widen our horizons in search of the most effective answers, and that search deserves wholehearted and earnest striving on everyone's part.

Are We Responsible for the Sufferings of Humanity?

This vital question has to be asked by all of us, and we should answer it to our conscience and our Creator. The answer lies in our role and responsibility as lowly individuals in the ocean of humanity. No matter how insignificant we feel, we still have a duty to perform for our fellow human beings. This spiritual duty was given to us the day we were born, but sadly the distractions of the material world made us forget it.

Humanity, confused and devoid of spirituality, is stuck in its ignorance, facing a crossroads and has to choose a path forward. The world is hungry for solutions and desperately searching for them in every outdated and archaic theory and philosophy while we sit on a treasure chest of remedies. It is time for us to arm ourselves with these remedies, share them with the high and low of our society, and fulfill our duty.

One of the solutions explained in the Baha'i Writings deals with solving our economic problems that have reached a critical level where thousands of our brothers and sisters are dragged into a life of poverty every day.

I have always felt that we are partly guilty for our indifference and inaction to change. My feelings have not changed since I wrote in 2015 the dedication of my book, "The Economics of the Future Begins Today":

"Dedicated to all the poor and underprivileged people of the world who our economic system has ignored. Their suffering is our failure to make a change."

I was delighted to come across this quote that confirmed my belief:

"There is so much suffering, such a great and desperate need for a true remedy and the Bahá'ís should realize their sacred obligation is to deliver the message to their fellowmen at once, and on as large a scale as possible. If they fail to do so, they are really partly responsible for prolonging the agony of humanity." -Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 127

Since my field of interest is economics, I concentrate on the sufferings caused by the mismanagement of the world's economic resources, which has left billions of people in misery, not having enough to eat – and others who have billions and find ridiculous ways of hoarding it or wasting it.

The rest of us, who are neither rich nor poor, can feel powerless about this unjust disparity. We may think we cannot do anything to bring about a change and must wait for the arrival

of a new system. I do not accept this excuse and believe we can gradually change the economic system by injecting morality and humanity into it, all while participating in our own economic activities. The global, democratically-elected administrative body of the world's Baha'is, the Universal House of Justice, recently wrote:

Every choice a Baha'i makes — as employee or employer, producer or consumer, borrower or lender, benefactor or beneficiary — leaves a trace, and the moral duty to lead a coherent life demands that one's economic decisions be in accordance with lofty ideals, that the purity of one's aims be matched by the purity of one's actions to fulfil those aims.

My book on spiritual solutions to the world's economic problems has a chapter called "Practical Economic Suggestions for Everyday Use." Here are 9 of them:

1. **Changing our mindset.** The first action we call all take is internal – by changing our mindset and recognizing that the Baha'i concept of economics is fundamentally different and is based on spiritual and moral principles. Abdu'l-Baha explained it clearly: **"The secrets of the whole economic question are Divine in nature, and are concerned with the world of the heart and spirit."**

2. **Pay a fair price.** If you feel that the price of something is too low, pay more than the asking price. One of the most beautiful things related to economic activities is the commitment of fair-minded people to disregard existing prices and pay more because they believe their estimate of the price to be just.

3. **Share profits with employees.** The workers need to have a share of the profits. Besides profit-sharing, there are many ways to help. Get medical coverage for employees. Support the emotional and physical well-being of employees. Taking care of workers is a privilege and an opportunity to serve people. Looking for such opportunities is a beautiful act.

4. **Pay fair wages,** not based on what society dictates. We do not need to follow the minimum wage guidelines. Society's wage guidelines should not prevent us from paying more if we think that is fair.

5. **Require reasonable interest rates**. If you lend money, ask for a reasonable interest rate, not the maximum one. The interest rate has to be fair and reasonable. Banks should not be the only ones setting interest rates.

6. **Participate in social and economic projects.** We can help change the world for the better by getting involved in these kinds of projects – they can represent a valuable way of learning and contributing.

7. **Create a consciousness of the human family.** Your welfare, well-being and happiness ultimately depend on the welfare, prosperity and happiness of every poor, needy, and underprivileged person in the world. The real meaning of the oneness of humankind will come into being when we see others as members of our family. The Universal House of Justice wrote: "**The welfare of any segment of humanity is inextricably bound up with the welfare of the whole. Humanity's collective life suffers when any one group thinks of its own well-being in isolation from that of its neighbours' or pursues economic gain without regard for how the natural environment, which provides sustenance for all, is affected.**"
8. **Give generously to those working for minimum wage or earning very little.** We can find ways to pay more to all those working for a minimum wage, be it in the form of a generous tip or giving more than the asking price to street sellers who earn a pittance from their sales. How can we otherwise reduce the gap between the rich and the poor if we do not make selfless contributions?

9. **Be considerate to those who rent from you.** Be sensitive to the situation of everyone. If they are in trouble, be flexible with their rent payments. Let them miss a payment or part of a payment. Besides your spiritual satisfaction, you also gain a tenant who cares for you and your property and will use it as if it's theirs. It makes economic sense since you will probably lessen the cost of repairs.

Each of these tips can help us apply Baha'u'llah's spiritual counsel to prefer his brother above himself. First, though, we all must evolve to the point where we see the oneness of the human family and see all people as our brothers and sisters.

Can We Have a Flag for Our Planet?

Lately, I've been wishing that we had a flag for our planet, along with our national flags. Wouldn't it be great to have one universal banner that offers the Earth our commitment, allegiance, respect, and love?

Actually, the topic of flags has been occupying my mind and soul for a long time, but I have to start with a disclaimer to avoid misunderstanding or accusations of being unpatriotic: I am not against any flag or country and have nothing against loving one's motherland or fatherland. I think that kind of patriotism shows the existence of passion, gratefulness, and loyalty.

But I do have a problem when those feelings of patriotism come at the cost of forgetting our love for our bigger home and the whole Earth.

This feeling is very personal. While watching the Olympics or other sports, I sometimes feel like I have divided loyalties since I have lived in Iran, India, China, Latin America, and Canada. Wherever I lived, I felt that it was my country and it was home to me.

As a Baha'i, I've taken it as my spiritual duty to obey the laws of the countries where I live. That experience taught me to realize the true meaning of Baha'u'llah's powerful passage from the Baha'i writings:

It is incumbent upon every man, in this Day, to hold fast unto whatsoever will promote the interests, and exalt the station, of all nations and just governments. … Whatsoever hath led the children of men to shun one another, and hath caused dissensions and divisions amongst them, hath, through the revelation of these words, been nullified and abolished. … It is not his to boast who loveth his country, but it is his who loveth the world …

With that Baha'i ideal of the oneness of the entire planet, how I wish we had a flag for the whole Earth – to show our love for it, salute it and even shed tears for its sad situation. By doing that, in reality, we show love for our individual countries, too.

How I wish we would not kill in the name of a small portion of the planet or wouldn't hate people who live on the other side of a borderline drawn, not by God, but by man.

How I wish some of those tears shed when the national anthems are played would be shed for a flag that represented our entire planet. It saddens me to see so much love being misplaced. I fear that these strong national sentiments block our love for the wider world and humanity itself. They may stop us from expanding our minds and souls to see how we need each other, no matter which side of a border we live on.

How I wish humanity had not divided our God-given planet into different pieces, which have changed throughout human history due to conflict, violence, and bloodshed.

My feelings, like all Baha'is who consider humanity as one family and the whole Earth as one country, try to expand our horizons beyond our national and religious allegiances. In a speech he gave in the United States in 1912, Abdu'l-Baha put it like this:

A fundamental teaching of Baha'u'llah is the oneness of the world of humanity. Addressing mankind, He says, "Ye are all leaves of one tree and the fruits of one branch." By this it is meant that the world of humanity is like a tree, the nations or peoples are the different limbs or branches of that tree, and the individual human creatures are as the fruits and blossoms thereof.

There is no shame in loving our home country, but not at the cost of making that a reason to dislike or hate or make war against others from other parts of the planet.

Sadly, those ready to kill and die for their homeland ignore the needs of our real home, the Earth. Due to our narrow view of nationalism, our home is in danger of being destroyed. This statement from the Universal House of Justice, the democratically-elected administrative body of the world's Baha'is, points out that fact:

Unbridled nationalism, as distinguished from a sane and legitimate patriotism, must give way to a wider loyalty, to the love of humanity as a whole. Baha'u'llah's statement is: "The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens". The concept of world citizenship is a direct result of the contraction of the world into a single neighbourhood through scientific advances and of the indisputable interdependence of nations. Love of all the world's peoples does not exclude love of one's country. The advantage of the part in a world society is best served by promoting the advantage of the whole. Current international activities in various fields which nurture mutual affection and a sense of solidarity among peoples need greatly to be increased.

Baha'is everywhere heed these words of Baha'u'llah, who wrote: "… **obliterate differences, and quench the flame of hatred and enmity, so that the whole earth may come to be viewed as one country.**"

Humanity has come a long way. I hope that soon, we will reach our collective maturity and accept that we are all citizens of Mother Earth. She is our true country. Then, we can direct

our energies and resources to the world's unification and healing the damages our ignorance and conflict have caused.

I hope that the next time we look at all the world's flags proudly displayed, we notice that our planet's flag is flying high. After all, as Abdu'l-Baha said:

Every one can live in any spot on the terrestrial globe. Therefore all the world is man's birthplace … Every limited area which we call our native country we regard as our motherland, whereas the terrestrial globe is the motherland of all …

Butter Chicken and Oneness of Religions

I am very blessed to still be in touch with my ex-students. It is mainly because our town is small. They are from all walks of life, and most of them now have children of their own. A few are the lifeguards at the pool I go to regularly, and a few swim with me and keep me company in the sauna. One of them is Derek, who has the purest heart and regularly visited me in my office during his school years, and we kept in touch after my retirement.

He has been to my house helping me with my garden work, and I have cooked food for him. He told me that he wanted to cook for me and bring it to my home. I said that would be wonderful.

I asked what he was planning to cook, and he said, "Butter chicken." I was surprised since that is an East Indian dish, and he is not an East Indian. I said that it would be good if he did not make it too spicy and hot. On my part, I told him that I would cook rice and make the salad.

On the appointed date, Derek called to say that his father had come to visit him from another town and asked if he could come too. I said that he was very welcome.

It so happened that on that day, I had promised an Iranian Muslim lady that she could come to my house to pick some fruits. She is new to town, and her work has brought her here. When she found out that I had some Iranian fruit trees, such as persimmons and medlars, she was eager to come and get some of them that I had put away for her. She had not eaten them since she had left Iran, so I invited her too.

After eating the food, we started to talk about the sad situation of the world and all the crises. Both the Muslim lady and Derek's father are staunch in their beliefs.

The Iranian lady was furious at the situation in Iran and how the mullahs had lied to people and misled the public. She believed that they had done things that had damaged Islam.

Derek's father, a Catholic, was not happy about the role of the clergy in his church, which made him leave the church. He felt the same as the Iranian lady and said that he was disappointed with what had happened in the name of Christianity.

They agreed about the negative role of priests and mullahs (they called them God's middlemen) in creating hatred and divisions.

As they were talking about this subject, I was thinking of this quote:

It seems both strange and pitiful that the church and clergy should always, in every age, be the most bitter opponents of the very truth they are continually admonishing their followers to be prepared to receive! They have become so violently attached to

the form that the substance itself eludes them! -Shoghi Effendi, Lights of Guidance, p. 419

In my turn, I mentioned that there is no clergy in the Baha'i Faith, and the Baha'is believe that all religions are fundamentally one and differ only in their social laws. I used the metaphor that religions are like pure healing water streaming down the mountain, and clergies use it as a political means, polluting it to the extent that it becomes hazardous to drink. That is why Baha'is do not interfere with politics.

At the end of our two-hour discussion and sharing our feelings and ideas, we agreed that the only solution for solving the world's problems is for all nations to become united in their efforts and find a religion that combines all the religions in one.

After they left and I did the dishes, I realized what an amazing thing had happened. A Muslim, a Baha'i and Christians of different ages agreed on the need for a universal and all-inclusive religion.

It was a miracle that three different people who did not know each other and with solid religious beliefs expressed their views respectfully and lovingly. There was harmony and friendliness in the air.

I tried to analyze how this happened and what caused it. I could not reach any conclusion. I had not planned this. It all started with Derek and me trying to have a meal together.

What made all of us with different age groups and views experience this? It was as if a mysterious force had taken over the discussion and led us to that conclusion. It is as if "The Spirit of the Age" we live in has taken over. Maybe it is because of helplessness felt worldwide due to overwhelming crises that highlighted the need for a solution. With all its unsolved issues and barely recovering from the pandemic, the world has been forced to reflect and do some soul-searching to counter the dangers ahead.

As a Baha'i, I could not reach any other conclusion except that the spirit of unity and oneness released by Baha'u'llah's revelation is at work with full force. All we can do is try to add to its strength; if not possible, do not be an obstacle in its path. The unity of humankind is not an ideal or slogan. It is the only way out left for the survival of the wayward humanity.

Shoghi Effendi clarifies this further:

"Let there be no mistake. The principle of the Oneness of Mankind—the pivot round which all the teachings of Baha'u'llah revolve—is no mere outburst of ignorant emotionalism or an expression of vague and pious hope. Its appeal is not to be merely identified with a reawakening of the spirit of brotherhood and good-will among men, nor does it aim solely at the fostering of harmonious cooperation among individual peoples and nations. Its implications are deeper, its claims greater than any which the

Prophets of old were allowed to advance. Its message is applicable not only to the individual, but concerns itself primarily with the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family. It does not constitute merely the enunciation of an ideal, but stands inseparably associated with an institution adequate to embody its truth, demonstrate its validity, and perpetuate its influence. It implies an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change such as the world has not yet experienced … It calls for no less than the reconstruction and the demilitarization of the whole civilized world—a world organically unified in all the essential aspects of its life, its political machinery, its spiritual aspiration, its trade and finance, its script and language, and yet infinite in the diversity of the national characteristics of its federated units."
– Shoghi Effendi, The World Order of Baha'u'llah, pp. 42-43

Maybe now is the time for humanity to reach maturity by accepting that oneness and unity are the next logical and necessary stage for its advancement.

I am so happy that I am left with the memory of that beautiful night when both my body and soul relished the delicious food.

The Beauty and Benefits When East and West Meet: My Experience

I have spent precisely half of my life in the global East and the other half living in the West. East and West functioned as schools of learning for me, educating me in unique ways.

I feel like a lucky plant rooted in the soil of the East, watered and nurtured by the West, and the recipient of the best of both worlds.

History is full of records of the past contributions of the East in culture, art, music, architecture, sciences and literature. The physical evidence of some of the East's rich cultures can still be seen today. The East is the birthplace of Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Christianity and many more religions. However, in recent centuries it has fallen behind the West in scientific discoveries and innovations.

On the other hand, the West has been the birthplace of many scientific discoveries that have advanced humanity and led to a better and more prosperous standard of living. Western science has discovered the smallest parts of atoms, mapped the DNA of the human body, and sent spaceships to distant planets looking for signs of life.

If I could describe the relationship between East and West simplistically, I would use the metaphor of the heart and brain in the human body. With its deep roots in spirituality, the East functions like the heart, pumping the lifeblood of guidance and values; the West, with its advancements in science and finance, functions like the brain.

Ultimately, they need to complement one another. The health of the body rests on them both. The brain sends signals to the heart to pump, and the heart supplies the brain with oxygen.

In his numerous talks and writings, Abdu'l-Baha mentioned the need for East and West to reach out to each other, as he did in this speech he gave in Paris:

In these days the East is in need of material progress and the West is in want of a spiritual idea. It would be well for the West to turn to the East for illumination, and to give in exchange its scientific knowledge. There must be this interchange of gifts.

The East and the West must unite to give to each other what is lacking. This union will bring about a true civilization, where the spiritual is expressed and carried out in

the material. Receiving thus the one from the other the greatest harmony will prevail, all people will be united, a state of great perfection will be attained, there will be a firm cementing, and this world will become a shining mirror for the reflection of the attributes of God.

I don't think I fully understood the implications of this concept until my local Baha'i community in Canada decided to adopt the Baha'i community of Jaipur in India (where I spent many years) as its sister community. We wanted to join forces and share experiences. When I suggested the idea to my community and my Baha'i friends in Jaipur, they were delighted and wholeheartedly welcomed it.

So we had an initial online meeting to get to know each other better. A few individuals decided to communicate directly and think of ways to connect some of the youth of the two communities.

I was so surprised to hear that some of the Indian Baha'is in Jaipur thought they would never see a Baha'i from the West in their lifetime and how fortunate they were to have this blessing. Our Baha'i friends here in British Columbia were in awe of seeing the friends from the East and spending a little time together. This confirmed, for all of us, what the Baha'i teachings say about uniting the East and the West, as in this talk from Abdu'l-Baha encouraging the Western Baha'is to interact with their Baha'i family in the East:

Today, the Baha'is of the East are longing with deep desire to see you face to face. Their highest hope and fondest wish is that the day may come when they will be gathered together in an assembly with you. Consider well the power that accomplished this wonderful transformation.

I saw the fruition of this process when our two communities started consulting to do a project together, which resulted in being virtual guests at the beautiful and elaborate celebration of their 100th anniversary of the Ascension of Abdu'l-Baha.

Soon, we realized that we were lucky in the West to have financial means, but we lacked human resources in our small community. In contrast, our friends in Jaipur have ample human resources, but they struggle with the finances to carry out their activities.

Our community decided to help with their efforts by contributing financially. We felt that sustainable support was the best way rather than a one-time contribution, and we have since been sending our share of responsibility for the activities.

Each member of our community feels a sense of pride and accomplishment due to this beautiful, world-embracing involvement and experience, helping with Baha'i activities

such as children's classes, junior youth activities, and devotional gatherings there. Friends in Jaipur are very grateful for our financial support.

Although humanity is closely connected by physical means, the hearts of people can be very distant from each other. Many walls, such as skin color, nationality, religion, political views, and language, hinder the East and the West from getting closer.

But whether we come from the East or the West, we each recognize that our world is getting smaller thanks to improvements in communication and transportation. This has highlighted the need for unified efforts by all countries and combining resources for the betterment of the world.

I am not sure that our community's small attempt to reach out to a community in the East will reduce the weight of the world's problems. Still, it surely has given us a sense of pride that at least we are working to cooperate with our brothers and sisters on the other side of the planet.

Humanomics: Alleviating Poverty Through Virtues

For many years, I've tried to emphasize the need for humanity and morality in our economic systems – because I believe that lack of morality is the root cause of misery in the lives of billions of people.

Those people struggle daily to survive in the face of immoral economic injustice.

So in this brief essay, I will try to define economics as it is now practiced in most places, point out its problems, and suggest a remedy.

The complex subject of economics is hard to define, so here's an easy way to understand it by going to the original root of the term: economics is derived from the Greek word "oikonomia," which refers to managing a household or family. This means, obviously, that an economic system is supposed to help us manage our households – not only in the individual sense but in the collective one, as well.

Every economic system, then, should exist to help sustain the welfare of all the human family members so they can, at a minimum, live comfortable lives and share their resources and earnings. That way, no family member lives in poverty or privation, and humanity as a whole can live a stable and productive existence. Historically, when great disparities in wealth exist, it destabilizes entire societies, provoking war and revolution – so a good economic system ensures prosperity and keeps the peace. The Baha'i teachings repeatedly call out this basic fact, as Abdu'l-Baha did in this speech he gave in Canada in 1912:

Although the body politic is one family, yet, because of lack of harmonious relations some members are comfortable and some in direst misery; some members are satisfied and some are hungry; some members are clothed in most costly garments and some families are in need of food and shelter. Why? Because this family lacks the necessary reciprocity and symmetry. This household is not well arranged. This household is not living under a perfect law. All the laws which are legislated do not ensure happiness. They do not provide comfort. Therefore, a law must be given to this family by means of which all the members of this family will enjoy equal well-being and happiness.

Is it possible for one member of a family to be subjected to the utmost misery and to abject poverty and for the rest of the family to be comfortable? It is impossible unless those members of the family be senseless, atrophied, inhospitable, unkind. Then they would say, "Though these members do belong to our family, let them alone. Let us look after ourselves. Let them die. So long as I am comfortable, I am honored, I am happy – this, my brother – let him die. If he be in misery, let him remain in misery, so long as I am comfortable. If he is hungry, let him remain so; I am satisfied. If he is without clothes, so long as I am clothed, let him remain as he is. If he is shelterless, homeless, so long as I have a home, let him remain in the wilderness."

Such utter indifference in the human family is due to lack of control, to lack of a working law, to lack of kindness in its midst. If kindness had been shown to the members of this family, surely all the members thereof would have enjoyed comfort and happiness.

Sadly, as most of us know, this lack of reciprocal kindness means our current economic systems do not work well – in the human family, one in ten people live on less than $2 a day. Globally, one-third of urban dwellers live in slums. What is the problem? Where did the system go wrong?

Perhaps the problem was exacerbated when Adam Smith, who observed economic activities in the marketplace as they relate to people's behavior, made some assumptions and came up with a system. He assumed that everyone wants to maximize their satisfaction or profits, with self-interest as the major motivation. He also said the market could correct itself, so no governmental intervention is necessary.

This made sense to many, but Mr. Smith's system left little room for morality or human virtues.

However, Adam Smith was a moral person, and many years before he wrote his book *The Wealth of the Nations,* he wrote *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. In that earlier book, Smith warned that there is an inherent danger in wealth that can corrupt human society. His warning was ignored.

In that sense, lack of spirituality contributes directly to the root cause of our economic problems because we have not included a moral component that would guide our conscience and actions.

In today’s economic reality, money has become like a religion; therefore, we follow the practice of everyone in it for themselves, making as much money as they want by any means. Nobody asks if someone is a good person or evinces praiseworthy actions. Many consider someone who is poor as a failure because they believe we have been created to make money and get rich.

It is easy to criticize the system itself, but that does not solve the problem.

Instead, we can all have a hand in reforming the system when we start injecting virtues gradually and slowly into it, so that it revives itself to become a system that is sensitive to the needs of humanity, sensitive to the poor people of the world, and responsive to the spiritual aspiration of human beings.

Every day we can practice virtues like truthfulness, kindness, generosity, and honesty in our economic activities. These spiritual virtues, common in all religions, create an environment of generosity, caring, and cooperation – all necessary for the poor to prosper. We can do the same by injecting human values into the political, educational, and other systems, because all systems suffer from the same afflictions.

As Baha'u'llah advised us in relation to those without means: "**O Ye Rich Ones on Earth! The poor in your midst are My trust; guard ye My trust, and be not intent only on your own ease.**"

We must take action – because our inaction is partly responsible for the suffering of the poor. If we don't change the system, millions of people will continue to live in misery every day, deprived of God's purpose for them because they are too busy finding a few dollars to survive.

We need "Humanomics" – economics with human elements – because we are humans and aspire to have those qualities and values. You may ask: how can we do this? What is my role? It is impossible to change a system, so why should I even try? All systems are subject to change, so, in countless small ways and some large ones, too, we all can make a difference.

Our actions will lay a solid spiritual foundation for the emerging future global economy – a balanced, equitable moral system with no room for the greed and extreme wealth that inevitably accompanies poverty and economic injustice. In that regard, we all need to ask ourselves a question, the answer to which sets the direction of the path for the rest of our lives. The question is: How much is enough? If you answer this question, it will lead you to the virtue of contentment.

In your answer to that question, you'll create a yardstick that measures your material and spiritual achievements. That yardstick, which considers spirituality as well as material things, changes our perspective. At present, sadly, our measurements are incredibly lopsided.

That personalized economic yardstick involves an important measurement: simple living. Throughout history, there have been a great many people who were symbols of simplicity. The Baha'is are blessed to follow the example of Abdu'l-Baha, who lived a simple life, avoided materialism, and shared whatever he had with others. Simplicity also makes financial sense, which can relieve us of so many headaches.

The pandemic highlighted the poor's plight, widening the gap even more between the rich and the poor, and now the war in Europe has dragged millions more into poverty and starvation. The need for action is dire and urgent. The Baha'i teachings urge every human being not to close our eyes to the sufferings of members of our human family. Baha'u'llah wrote this advice to a king:

Fear the sighs of the poor and of the upright in heart who, at every break of day, bewail their plight ... They, verily, are thy treasures on earth. It behoveth thee, therefore, to safeguard thy treasures from the assaults of them who wish to rob thee. Inquire into their affairs, and ascertain, every year, nay every month, their condition, and be not of them that are careless of their duty.

By introducing spiritual virtues into our economic life, we begin to revolutionize the economic system within and change it to a humane system that meets the material needs and spiritual aspirations that God meant for everybody.

“Russians Love Their Children Too”

The renowned musician Sting released a profound song called “Russians” during the last years of the Cold War after the Western level of fear and hatred of Russians had reached a peak.
Sting’s song gently reminded us about the fundamental fact that no matter what country or political ideology we belong to, we are human beings first.

We all have the same basic human emotions, such as love for our children, the lyrics of the song say:

In Europe and America there’s a growing feeling of hysteria
Conditioned to respond to all the threats
In the rhetorical speeches of the Soviets
Mister Krushchev said, “We will bury you”
I don’t subscribe to this point of view
It’d be such an ignorant thing to do
If the Russians love their children too
How can I save my little boy from Oppenheimer’s deadly toy?
There is no monopoly on common sense
On either side of the political fence
We share the same biology, regardless of ideology
Believe me when I say to you
I hope the Russians love their children too
There is no historical precedent
To put the words in the mouth of the president?
There’s no such thing as a winnable war
It’s a lie we don’t believe anymore
Mister Reagan says, “We will protect you”
I don’t subscribe to this point of view
Believe me when I say to you
I hope the Russians love their children too
We share the same biology, regardless of ideology
But what might save us, me and you
Is if the Russians love their children too.

The lyrics seem outdated now, but the message remains fresh and clear. It points us to the universal fact that parents everywhere love their children, worry about their future, and fear losing them.

In the bygone days of the Cold War, fear, paranoia, and mistrust reigned. Demagogues stoked those fears. Americans suspected other Americans of being spies or Russian sympathizers. Government hearings caused many Americans to lose their jobs in the arts and entertainment industry; some even went to jail.

Today, once again, the same kinds of hatred and negative feelings have entered the world – particularly because of the war and the destruction in Ukraine.

The Western mass media's coverage of this devastating war seems comprehensive and detailed, especially in its reporting of deaths and bombardments. Many stories of suffering Ukrainians are reported.

Sadly, in the West, we miss seeing the faces of the suffering on the other side – such as the dead Russian soldier's mother and father, who do not even know where their son's body lies. These soldiers were forced to leave home to fight a war that they most likely did not want and were killed, causing great heartbreak for their grieving parents. The Western media has no access to these soldiers or their parents so that they can share their pain and agony, and that is a tragedy because "The Russians love their children too."

Any human death is a tragedy. It does not matter if they are Ukrainian, Russian, American, or German – the savagery of war has to stop. In a speech he gave in the United States in 1912, Abdu'l-Baha told us why:

For thousands of years men and nations have gone forth to the battlefield to settle their differences. The cause of this has been ignorance and degeneracy. Praise be to God! In this radiant century minds have developed, perceptions have become keener, eyes are illumined and ears attentive. Therefore, it will be impossible for war to continue. Consider human ignorance and inconsistency. A man who kills another man is punished by execution, but a military genius who kills one hundred thousand of his fellow creatures is immortalized as a hero. One man steals a small sum of money and is imprisoned as a thief. Another pillages a whole country and is honored as a patriot and conqueror. A single falsehood brings reproach and censure, but the wiles of politicians and diplomats excite the admiration and praise of a nation. Consider the ignorance and inconsistency of mankind. How darkened and savage are the instincts of humanity!

How much longer does humanity need to realize that there is no winning for those who lose their lives and whose families will grieve and suffer? Sadly, it is mostly young people who have their whole life ahead of them who must pay the ultimate price in every war.

How much longer do we glorify killings in our psyches and our cultures through songs and movies? Instead, let's put all these energies into educating humanity on settling disputes through reasoning and peaceful methods. At the same time, we can work toward getting our governments united so they can rise against aggressors and stop them.

In his writings, Baha'u'llah has suggested the path that humanity must follow:

The time must come when the imperative necessity for the holding of a vast, an all-embracing assemblage of men will be universally realized. The rulers and kings of the earth must needs attend it, and, participating in its deliberations, must consider such ways and means as will lay the foundations of the world's Great Peace amongst men. Such a peace demandeth that the Great Powers should resolve, for the sake of the tranquillity of the peoples of the earth, to be fully reconciled among themselves. Should any king take up arms against another, all should unitedly arise and prevent him. If this be done, the nations of the world will no longer require any armaments, except for the purpose of preserving the security of their realms and of maintaining internal order within their territories. This will ensure the peace and composure of every people, government and nation.

We cannot even imagine the amount of money and resources that would be saved by the nations not stockpiling weapons and maintaining huge armed forces. If we stopped our warlike ways, all of those savings could be used for constructive purposes such as eradicating diseases and eliminating poverty.

The news of the Ukraine war has attracted the world's attention, so it is easy to forget that some Russians in Russia are fighting for freedom, voicing their opposition to this war, and going to jail for speaking out.

As we mourn every death in Ukraine mourn the destruction of the country and other parts of the globe; let us also grieve with the mothers and fathers of the dead Russian soldiers who died by following orders. Those parents loved their children, too.

Now is an excellent time not to get carried away with hate to take the path of moderation. We can all pray for peace and remind ourselves that not every German is a Nazi, not every person from the Middle East is a terrorist, and not every Russian is a warmonger. The unity and peace of our entire species depends on our ability to transcend national boundaries and, as Baha'u'llah taught, to consider ourselves world citizens.

The Spiritual Benefits of Navigating Through Misinformation

The spread of misinformation and lies has now extended into multiple aspects of our lives, eating away at humanity's fundamental realities. It has paralyzed so many that they have lost hope for the future.

People feel confused about what to believe and struggle to find the truth everywhere.

Not long ago, people were used to getting their news from newspapers, radio, and television, and for the most part, they trusted those sources – but now information comes filtered through so many untrustworthy, commercialized, partisan outlets that convey the exact opposite. Finding the truth requires searching through all kinds of misinformation and even a plethora of outright lies to discover what all the contradicting views and facts really mean.

Baha'is Must Independently Investigate Reality

Perhaps that's one of the reasons Baha'is have a spiritual duty to investigate for themselves and not follow others blindly. In a talk he gave in Washington, D.C., in 1912, Abdu'l-Baha said:

The first teaching of Baha'u'llah is the duty incumbent upon all to investigate reality. What does it mean to investigate reality? It means that man must forget all hearsay and examine truth himself, for he does not know whether statements he hears are in accordance with reality or not. Wherever he finds truth or reality, he must hold to it, forsaking, discarding all else; for outside of reality there is naught but superstition and imagination.

This principle represents a great challenge facing humanity. What we need is a higher level of personal investigative abilities so we can each find truth.

The invention of printing and later mass media like radio and television, and now the internet, has made it easy to spread lies and half-truths to a large number of people. With the exponential increase in how many people mass media-driven information can now reach, things have gotten progressively more complex and complicated – but hopefully, our understanding and intellectual abilities will keep pace with these changes.

Now, in order to determine the truth, we must train ourselves and our intellects to do more research and dig deeper to find the facts – and that process can sharpen our intellects and add to our discernment. We need moral guidance to become savvier and more

knowledgeable because when we try to discern the truth, it requires us to learn the bare facts and what those facts actually mean. Investigating more deeply will serve us well and benefit our collective human development. A dedicated search for the truth gives us investigative insights that can penetrate through the thickness of misinformation to get to the reality of any statement or situation.

Our God-Given Truth-Seeking Capabilities

The Baha'i teachings say that the Creator has given us this ability to determine what is true and what is not, and it is up to us to use it. Abdu'l-Baha said:

God has given man the eye of investigation by which he may see and recognize truth. He has endowed man with ears that he may hear the message of reality and conferred upon him the gift of reason by which he may discover things for himself. This is his endowment and equipment for the investigation of reality. Man is not intended to see through the eyes of another, hear through another's ears nor comprehend with another's brain. Each human creature has individual endowment, power and responsibility in the creative plan of God. Therefore, depend upon your own reason and judgment and adhere to the outcome of your own investigation; otherwise, you will be utterly submerged in the sea of ignorance and deprived of all the bounties of God.

The truth, however, isn't just a set of concrete circumstances – it goes far beyond mere facts, and crosses over into the realm of values. This means we each have to adopt a set of over-arching principles or values that allow us to measure what is right and compare it to what is wrong.

When we make these changes in our thinking and in our approach to reality, they allow us to evolve to a higher level of understanding.

Separating Truth from Fiction

We're all busy, and everyone has a limited attention span and only a finite amount of time to become informed. Since we take in literally thousands of media-borne messages each day, we have to find reliable ways to filter the false ones out. This problem describes our present situation, and we must live with the confusion. But we are assured of a future – the Baha'i teachings refer to it as a "Golden Age" – when humanity has reached such spiritual maturity that there is no room for using these corrupt methods of lying and denying the truth.

In this environment, no one can afford the luxury of being indifferent. When we don't try to investigate the truth independently, we take on the easy or lazy attitude adopted by many these days. If we want to base our lives on truth rather than fiction, we need to work hard for it, investing physical and spiritual energy. Why? Because ignorance leads to terrible life decisions, and knowledge points us in the right direction. That is how great goals are achieved, and growth is essential for achieving our life's spiritual purpose.

Then, and only then, we can start discerning the realities from falsehood and become a lighthouse in the darkness of the ocean of confusion. So, in a way, this swimming through an ocean of misinformation is a beautiful process that humanity is going through – painful, no doubt, but not necessarily without its benefits. Suppose we adopt a rigorous practice of separating fact from fiction and develop a set of spiritual principles and values to guide us through our existence's turbulent world. In that case, we can stand firm and face all the misinformation that comes our way.

We have the opportunity to use the misinformation that comes our way to our advantage – we can make those lemons into a refreshing lemonade and quench our thirst for truth with it in these trying and politically-charged times. This positive attitude has been the hallmark of humanity down through the ages, so there is no reason we should give up now and reject these God-given challenges that, in the end, will take us to a higher level of maturity.

Letting Go of Entitlement and Embracing Gratitude

Today, the world is experiencing great confusion that has made humanity forget some fundamental values that could save us from great misery and one of these forgotten values is thankfulness.

A sense of entitlement pervades many cultures and prevents them from appreciating the gifts given to them. Sadly, for many, that sense of entitlement has replaced gratitude.

Some people spend more time pointing to the things they demand and not enough time appreciating their blessings for the things they have. Regrettably, gratefulness and thankfulness have become scarce commodities.

Scientific studies have repeatedly shown that gratitude creates contentment, which leads to peace of mind and makes us appreciate the gifts given to us by the Creator. God wants nothing from us but our love, and in return, provides us with the vast universe and everything in it as our playground to enjoy.

In a talk he gave in New York City in 1912, Abdu'l-Baha pointed us to the crucial things we should all be grateful for:

Do you realize how much you should thank God for His blessings? If you should thank Him a thousand times with each breath, it would not be sufficient because God has created and trained you. He has protected you from every affliction and prepared every gift and bestowal. Consider what a kind Father He is. He bestows His gift before you ask. We were not in the world of existence, but as soon as we were born, we found everything prepared for our needs and comfort without question on our part. He has given us a kind father and compassionate mother, provided for us two springs of salubrious milk, pure atmosphere, refreshing water, gentle breezes and the sun shining above our heads. In brief, He has supplied all the necessities of life although we did not ask for any of these great gifts. …
He has bestowed both upon us – without asking and with supplication. He has created us in this radiant century, a century longed for and expected by all the sanctified souls in past periods. It is a blessed century; it is a blessed day. The philosophers of history have agreed that this century is equal to one hundred past centuries. This is true from every standpoint. This is the century of science, inventions, discoveries and universal laws. This is the century of the revelation of the mysteries of God. This is the century of the effulgence of the rays of the Sun of Truth. Therefore, you must render thanks and glorification to God that you were born in this age. Furthermore, you have listened to the call of Baha'u'llah. …

You were asleep; you are awakened. Your ears are attentive; your hearts are informed. You have acquired the love of God. You have attained to the knowledge of God. This is the most great bestowal of God. This is the breath of the Holy Spirit, and this consists of faith and assurance. This eternal life is the second birth; this is the baptism of the Holy Spirit. … You must appreciate the value of this bounty and engage your time in mentioning and thanking the True One.

As a Baha'i, I am incredibly grateful for the gifts of the Baha'i writings that guide each Baha'i from birth to beyond their physical existence. They include subjects such as educating children, choosing the spiritual path of our lives, and facing the tests and difficulties that come our way – and even include how to view the journey to the next world and the meaning of death. In short, the Baha'i writings cover all aspects of human life, giving us guidance, joy and hope.

All this guidance, sent for our benefit, can help us to aspire to a higher spiritual understanding. In return, we must try to know God and show our gratitude. Understanding God and our relation to Him is complex, and we will never get to know Him due to our limited ability to comprehend Him. But luckily, a recent personal experience helped me see a glimpse of what my relationship with my Creator could be.

I have a beautiful garden, my prize material possession, with a wide variety of flowers and fruit trees. Flowers attract birds and insects, and among them are a few families of hummingbirds who enjoy the flowers I have planted and the feeders I've filled specifically for them. I felt happy to see that they enjoyed the feeders, but their fighting over them saddened me. I wished they would stop fighting, start sharing, and live peacefully together in this beautiful garden.

The hummingbirds liked the feeders so much that they decided not to migrate. Instead, they have stayed the winter with me for the past few years. I kept the feeders full for the whole winter since no flowers or other food sources existed. Last winter was extremely cold, and the temperature went below zero. The feeders would freeze at night, so I had to defrost them every morning and put them out again. One day, as I was putting out a feeder for these tiny birds and watching their happiness, I realized they would die if I did not feed them. Then I realized how much I loved them and how sad I would be without them.

How I wished that they knew how much I loved them. They didn't realize that their life was in my hands — or that I made sure they were provided for — because of my love for them. Nobody asked me to do that. At that moment, it dawned on me that, really, this is what God wishes for us: recognition and gratitude in return for His gifts.

Unlike the hummingbirds who have no idea of the gifts given to them, I hope we recognize the Creator's gift of life and His love for us. He has made provisions for all our needs. All we have to do is to acknowledge them and be grateful for them.

Like humanity, my birds fought the whole summer, and I gave up finding ways to make them stop fighting, share the feeders, and eat together. I resigned myself to their aggressive

territorial behavior, but to my surprise, they started eating together by the summer's end. I was so happy to see five birds sitting together and sustaining themselves on the same small feeder. Their unity delighted me, and I took a photo of that moment so I could relish it in the future – and as proof that we humans can do the same.

I hope that, like the birds in my garden, humanity stops fighting and realizes the need for the oneness of humankind. We, too, can learn to unite and enjoy the world's gifts, count our blessings, and show our gratitude every day.

A Baha'i Duty: Defending the Essence of All Religions

Recently, I revisited this profound quote from the writings of Baha'u'llah, and this time it penetrated my soul and made me clearly see what is happening all around us in every part of the world:

The vitality of men's belief in God is dying out in every land; nothing short of His wholesome medicine can ever restore it. The corrosion of ungodliness is eating into the vitals of human society; what else but the Elixir of His potent Revelation can cleanse and revive it?

Here, in two sentences, Baha'u'llah diagnoses humanity's primary problem and suggests the remedy.

This quote stirred my soul and made me think there has to be something I can do. After all, when the Creator, through the voice of His messenger, laments, "**The vitality of men's belief in God is dying out in every land**," it makes me realize that humanity's peace and salvation are in God's hands – and in our hands, too.

We need to retain the great spiritual laws taught by all Faiths – while, at the same time, adjusting the social laws inspired by those religions to the needs of the time, as Abdu'l-Baha recommended in a speech he gave in Chicago in 1912:

… the divine law has two distinct aspects or functions: one the essential or fundamental, the other the material or accidental. The first aspect of the revealed religion of God is that which concerns the ethical development and spiritual progress of mankind, the awakening of potential human susceptibilities and the descent of divine bestowals. These ordinances are changeless, essential, eternal. The second function of the divine religion deals with material conditions, the laws of human intercourse and social regulation. These are subject to change and transformation in accordance with the time, place and conditions.

In recent times, I've found myself defending Islam from the criticisms of Muslims themselves – those who feel fed up with the mullahs and the fanaticism of some other Muslims and who no longer want anything to do with Islam as a result. Mounting that defence has proven to be a difficult task since most people cannot or will not differentiate the actions of mullahs from Islam's inherent spirituality and its essential teachings.

By the same token, I have defended Christianity from Christians who want nothing more to do with the priests and other Christians who have damaged the image of Christianity with their actions.

All of this has made me more determined to counsel disheartened Muslims, Christians, and followers of other religions, urging them not to "throw the baby out with the bathwater." That's where the rejection of religion generally comes from, in my experience – people cast doubt on the spiritual laws of their Faiths when they simply need to re-examine the social laws inspired by their religions, which are subject to change.

So, the spread of irreligiousness today has added another role to the principal aim of the Baha'i Faith, which is to work towards achieving the oneness of humanity. Since the magnetism of religion is losing power and becoming more irrelevant in the eyes of the world, Baha'is defend each religion's essence and the sacredness of the Holy Books and their authors – because, as Baha'u'llah wrote, all religions are one:

Know thou assuredly that the essence of all the Prophets of God is one and the same. Their unity is absolute. God, the Creator, saith: There is no distinction whatsoever among the Bearers of My Message. They all have but one purpose; their secret is the same secret. To prefer one in honor to another, to exalt certain ones above the rest, is in no wise to be permitted. Every true Prophet hath regarded His Message as fundamentally the same as the Revelation of every other Prophet gone before Him.

Baha'is defend the spirituality of all of the great religions. If it is not protected or denied and belittled, then discussing the progression of religions becomes impossible.

In his summary statement about the Baha'i teachings to the nascent United Nations in 1947, Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith, explained:

The fundamental principle enunciated by Baha'u'llah, the followers of His Faith firmly believe, is that Religious truth is not absolute but relative, that Divine Revelation is a continuous and progressive process, that all the great religions of the world are divine in origin, that their basic principles are in complete harmony, that their aims and purposes are one and the same, that their teachings are but facets of one truth, that their functions are complementary, that they differ only in the non-essential aspects of their doctrines and that their missions represent successive stages in the spiritual evolution of human society.

Humanity needs to face the unprecedented crises of today with all of its spiritual tools at the ready, and its future rests on the degree of the unification of all countries and of all religions. Sadly, the pure water of the messages of spiritual healing has been combined with so many impurities that it no longer possesses all of its original healing qualities.

What the world needs today is not the destruction of all things sacred and moral in the name of freedom of speech and action. That sense of the sacred is the cause of our salvation – and it stems originally from the holy books of all religions.

Baha'is believe that to defend those spiritual values and the origin of those teachings in all religions is our moral duty. Since all Faiths are essentially one, they're all part of our Faith.

As I maintain friendships with people of all different Faiths, I try to make sure that they know my respect for their prophets, messengers, and holy writings. As Abdu'l-Baha wrote:

The divine religions must be the cause of oneness among men, and the means of unity and love; they must promulgate universal peace, free man from every prejudice, bestow joy and gladness, exercise kindness to all men and do away with every difference and distinction.

How the Rich Are Accepting the Baha'i Call to Help the Poor

We've all noticed the contrast between the constructive and destructive forces at play in our lives. They affect all aspects of life, including the world's great poverty and wealth disparities, for good and bad.
Sadly, our media outlets generally cover negative news and even sensationalize it, which means the news of so many remarkable, uplifting events and positive philanthropic works do not get the coverage they need or deserve.

One of these positive developments, which has been largely ignored or met with a suspicious mindset, is the emerging trend in which an increasing number of rich people voluntarily give their wealth to the needy. The statistics show that a growing number of billionaires, millionaires, and, yes, even regular folks are actively donating more money to charitable causes.

In our world today, wealthier people and nations have begun to be more concerned with playing their role in solving some of the problems of the poor and needy.
However, this news has not filtered down to most people. Many still believe that the wealthy do not care for the poor at all and that their donations have selfish motives, such as tax deductions. That's certainly true of some wealthy individuals, but today, more money is flowing to charities and relief organizations than ever before – and much of it comes from the massive donations wealthy individuals and corporations make.

We can view this trend as the first clumsy step of a child learning to walk since the rich are in the uncharted territory of giving rather than taking. Like a child trying to walk who repeatedly falls, mistakes are part of learning; however, this early attempt is moving in the right direction, no matter how imperfect it might look now.

For example, when it was reported that Bill Gates had given $6 billion to charities, the news went generally unnoticed. Few saw his act as positive and worthy of praise. This indifference occurred despite ample proof that some of the wealthy do care deeply for their fellow human brothers and sisters. They should be recognized for this and praised and encouraged. As responsible citizens, we must give credit where credit is due.

The Baha'i writings speak very clearly about the moral obligation of those who possess great wealth and the heavenly rewards awaiting those rich people who
follow Baha'u'llah's injunctions and help the poor through charitable acts. In several of his tablets, including these two (below), Baha'u'llah praised the wealthy who voluntarily give to the poor:

Charity is pleasing and praiseworthy in the sight of God and is regarded as a prince among goodly deeds. … Blessed is he who preferreth his brother before himself. Verily, such a man is reckoned, by virtue of the Will of God, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise, with the people of Baha who dwell in the Crimson Ark.
They who are possessed of riches, however, must have the utmost regard for the poor, for great is the honor destined by God for those poor who are steadfast in patience. By My life! There is no honor, except what God may please to bestow, that can compare to this honor. Great is the blessedness awaiting the poor that endure patiently and conceal their sufferings, and well is it with the rich who bestow their riches on the needy and prefer them before themselves.

So, not every wealthy person is selfish and heartless. The Baha'i teachings assure us that a new race of people who exemplify the best human values will gradually evolve – and that the wealthy will start changing their attitudes toward wealth, finding the most satisfaction when they spend their wealth on their fellow human beings rather than hoarding it or spending it on only themselves.

Statistics on Philanthropy

As an example from just one country, Americans and U.S.-based organizations gave about $484.85 billion to national charities in 2021. That number increased 4 per cent from the previous year's estimated $466.23 billion, according to Giving USA, as the Lilly Family School of Philanthropy reported. Some of the wealthiest Americans gave as much as $15 billion during the year, which represented 5 per cent of all giving by individuals.

A few of the highlights from Giving USA's annual report include:

- Roughly $326.87 billion in donations by individuals
- An estimated $90.88 billion by foundations and other organizations
- More than $46 billion through bequests, which are made through trusts and wills
- More than $28 billion in corporate donations

The Giving Pledge

The Giving Pledge, started in 2010 in an effort by Bill Gates, Melinda French Gates, and Warren Buffett, aims to get billionaires to donate more than half of their wealth to charity. That Pledge has set a new standard of generosity among the ultra-wealthy – to date, 230 individual billionaires from 28 countries have signed the pledge.

Today, more than ever in history, negativity has darkened people's minds. In the face of that force, our moral duty is to remind ourselves and others about the daily positive actions around us and magnify them to offset the negative forces. The rich, too, need our support and encouragement. Who can judge and say that the rich have no heart? As many wealthy individuals have proven recently, it is possible to become attracted to God's mercy by following Abdu'l-Baha's advice:

Man reacheth perfection through good deeds, voluntarily performed, not through good deeds the doing of which was forced upon him. And sharing is a personally chosen righteous act: that is, the rich should extend assistance to the poor, they should expend their substance for the poor, but of their own free will, and not because the poor have gained this end by force. For the harvest of force is turmoil and the ruin of the social order. On the other hand voluntary sharing, the freely-chosen expending of one's substance, leadeth to society's comfort and peace.

How Can We Distribute Wealth Fairly?

The Baha'i concept of economics asks humanity to eliminate the extremes of wealth and poverty. For more than 40 years, I have studied that concept and thought I had some general ideas about it.
Recently, though, I realized how I've often failed to connect Abdu'l-Baha's examples in his daily life to the whole idea of the distribution of wealth. Since Abdu'l-Baha is the exemplar of how to lead a Baha'i life, I'm fascinated by his legendary generosity and service to humanity, but I missed seeing the connections he made between charity and the distribution of wealth.

I have observed, with great amazement, how the spiritual teachings of the Faith suggest solutions to the economic problems that have baffled economists. I've noticed, too, that the Baha'i writings related to the distribution of wealth are designed to eliminate global poverty. The more I've studied, the more impressed I've become with the wisdom of those God-given solutions offered by Abdu'l-Baha through his examples, writings, and talks.

Let's begin here: the distribution of wealth is one of the primary functions of any economic system. From every indication, the present economic system in much of the world has failed to distribute wealth justly and equitably. This fact – clearly evident from an ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor – means that billions of people live below the poverty line while multi-billionaires accumulate enormous wealth every day.

From an economic point of view, it's clear that this system has failed to deliver and fairly distribute wealth. The question is why. The Baha'i writings explain that one of the main reasons is the lack of spirituality and morality in the economic system. Abdu'l-Baha said:

"**The secrets of the whole economic question are Divine in nature, and are concerned with the world of the heart and spirit.**"

In this short essay, I'll briefly share my understanding of the principles of the distribution of wealth based on the Baha'i writings and suggest a few practical ways to follow the examples set for us by Baha'u'llah and Abdu'l-Baha.

Guaranteed Basic Income

The writings and talks by Abdu'l-Baha support a kind of universal basic income. GBI, or Guaranteed Basic Income, is a relatively new economic concept that many economists and governments are now implementing or considering. It ensures that every citizen who needs it is guaranteed a minimum income to cover the basic costs of all the essentials for their living. This concept, supported by leaders and philosophers as diverse as Thomas Paine, Bertrand Russell, Thomas More, and William Beveridge, bundles all social policy and

welfare measures into a single instrument designed to exemplify the idea that "a rising tide lifts all boats."
In a speech he gave in Paris in 1911, Abdu'l-Baha said:

The government of the countries should conform to the Divine Law which gives equal justice to all. This is the only way in which the deplorable superfluity of great wealth and miserable, demoralizing, degrading poverty can be abolished. Not until this is done will the Law of God be obeyed.

Profit Sharing, Wages, and Pensions

Another method for fair distribution of wealth is sharing the profit of the business or factory with the workers – and paying them wages that enable them to live comfortably and have enough for their rainy days and old age. In the book *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Baha said:

… laws and regulations should be enacted which would grant the workers both a daily wage and a share in a fourth or fifth of the profits of the factory in accordance with its means, or which would have the workers equitably share in some other way in the profits with the owners. For the capital and the management come from the latter and the toil and labour from the former. The workers could either be granted a wage that adequately meets their daily needs, as well as a right to a share in the revenues of the factory when they are injured, incapacitated, or unable to work, or else a wage could be set that allows the workers to both satisfy their daily needs and save a little for times of weakness and incapacity.

Storehouses

The Baha'i writings advocate the establishment of community storehouses in every village and town. The primary function of these storehouses is to collect tax revenues and ensure their disbursements for the welfare and the needs of the poor and the disabled. In *The Baha'i World*, Abdu'l-Baha explained how they should function:

These are the seven revenues, but there are seven fixed expenditures.
The first expenditure: The store-house ought to give one-tenth to the Government, to the public treasury for the public expenses.
The second expenditure is for the poor. The poor who are in need, those who are exempt, not those who are idle. For instance, if a person's crop is burned or he has a loss in his business, and for this reason has become poor; these poor people are to be taken care of.
Third: The infirm, who come to want and cannot work.
Fourth: The orphans. To them also help must be given.
Fifth: The schools. The schools must be organized for the education of the children.
Sixth: For the deaf and blind.
Seventh: Public health. Whatever is necessary for the public health must be arranged. Swamps should be filled up, water should be brought in; whatever is necessary for the public health.

Examples to Follow

Personally, I believe that Abdu'l-Baha was the essence of selfless giving. He gave love and all his material possessions; he even gave his clothes to the poor. He generously contributed to charitable organizations. In brief, he gave all he had. Each example of his generous giving offers an example to follow if we want to see the voluntary distribution of wealth on a small scale. We need these small, person-to-person steps to reduce the gap between the poor and the rich everywhere. In this way, we can all make a difference in the life of those who struggle materially.

We can find sacrificial ways to pay more to all those working for a minimum wage, be it in the form of a generous tip or more than the asking price to street sellers who earn very little from their living. If we're financially secure ourselves, we can help pay for the medical expenses of those who do not have the means. We can support those who are struggling to pay their rent. We can buy groceries for the needy and provide food for hungry people. We can provide accommodation for the sick and needy**.** Most sick people in rural areas must travel to bigger cities to get treatment and naturally must stay in hotels and motels. Opening our homes and hearts to help the sick was Abdul'-Baha's way, and his wish was for us to emulate him.
Additionally, we can pay for the education of poor children. The Baha'i writings emphasize education as a means of transforming society, and, in his *Most Holy Book*, Baha'u'llah advised us to raise and educate every child as if they were his own:

"He that bringeth up his son or the son of another, it is as though he hath brought up a son of Mine; upon him rest My Glory, My loving kindness, My Mercy, that have compassed the world."

When this sort of kind becomes more universal, a compassionate future economic system based on spirituality will bring solutions to remedy the unjust distribution of wealth. But until then, we each need to play our part. We can find many ways to participate. Otherwise, how can we reduce the gap between the rich and the poor if we do not find ways to do our share and make small contributions? If we sincerely want to find ways to eradicate poverty by contributing toward a more just and equitable distribution of wealth in the world, then we can all start in our own lives by giving to others.

My Lessons in Detachment and Reliance on a Higher Power

Aging has many benefits, allowing us to reflect on events in our past and understand how they changed the direction of our lives – which creates a good learning tool to analyze each life and its direction.

In my life, I always thought I had tried to follow the spiritual principle of detachment – to avoid accumulating too many material possessions or following the pathways of acquisitiveness and greed.

In other words, I wanted to run away from the material world because it could pollute my soul.

Originally, my approach was classical, black-and-white, which meant all or nothing. I told myself that this is the path Sufis, monks, nuns, and Sadhus adopt, attempting to reach higher planes of spirituality, denouncing the material world out of devotion, all in pursuit of eternal spiritual happiness.

This passage from the Baha'i writings, along with many other similar ones from different religions and philosophies, motivated me on my path of detachment:

Beware lest ye cling unto that which ye possess, or take pride in your fame and renown. That which behoveth you is to wholly detach yourselves from all that is in the heavens and on the earth.
As time passed and I got older, I began to re-evaluate my concept of detachment.

Studying the Baha'i writings made me realize a new way of approaching my goal. I gradually recognized that I was trying to detach, escape from reality, and take the easy way out by not facing life's challenges. But as I came to see, detachment means living a responsible and productive life with all of its demands – and still being detached. Baha'u'llah gave this advice to those who attempt to practice detachment by withdrawing from the world:

… O concourse of monks! Seclude not yourselves in your churches and cloisters. Come ye out of them by My leave, and busy, then, yourselves with what will profit you and others. Thus commandeth you He Who is the Lord of the Day of Reckoning. Seclude yourselves in the stronghold of My love. This, truly, is the seclusion that befitteth you, could ye but know it. He that secludeth himself in his house is indeed as one dead.

So I initially tried to be detached without knowing how to do it. I tried and prayed, but I still failed to achieve it in a practical way that could become my habit and my spiritual practice.

After I grew a little older, while taking inventory of this part of my life, of all my successes and failures, I discovered that my life had been steered positively and fruitfully despite my failed attempts at detachment. I realized that the Creator's mercy had guided my life for the better and, most of the time, despite my own personal judgment and lack of cooperation. All of this made me realize that my approach to detachment was lopsided. Yes, I tried to be detached, but I didn't know how to ensure that my spiritual journey was heading in the right direction.

A personal experience made this matter clearer. My father was the only one in his family who was a Baha'i – he had four Muslim brothers. The youngest, a devout Muslim, tried to live what he thought of as a pious life and wanted his children to follow his example. So he did not allow TV, radio, or music in his home. Going to the movies was also not allowed since films were made by foreigners, who he saw as the enemies of Islam and the source of all corruption. He expected his children to follow his example, but the result was quite the opposite. One of his sons is now an actor and a comedian in Hollywood. Later, the father regretted his actions and admitted his methods were wrong. That example provided a simple yet important lesson for me: avoidance is not the right way to live, and detachment does not mean non-involvement.

The Baha'i teachings suggest that true happiness is detachment from all else except God – but that detachment does not mean having possessions or wealth is wrong. They instead suggest that while we enjoy the world and the material benefits available to us, our relationship with God should be uncompromised, a relationship that is based on service and love for humanity.

This implies that our inner being must focus on the spiritual realities regardless of our material achievements. It means we should be unaffected by gains or losses and detached from blame or praise. It recommends detaching from selfish desires and from our own egos.

I reflected on my life from that perspective and soon realized that an invisible force had aided and guided me throughout my life. I realized that the Creator had been with me all my life without my awareness, like a good Friend, a Father. He had chosen what was best for me. So now I find practical ways to be detached, do my best, and happily leave the rest to Him, knowing that His Will is a thousand times more beneficial for me than anything I could dream up.

Building Communities that Encompass Everyone

To achieve the oneness of humanity, we need to build inclusive, cohesive communities worthy of the future – communities that welcome and encompass everyone.

How can we possibly do that? It's not easy because each community is different, consisting of people of different ages, cultural backgrounds, religious beliefs, sexual orientations, political views, and financial means. The diversity in our population requires a unifying force so everyone can experience peace, harmony, love, a sense of belonging and inclusion.

Not too many places in our world currently deal with this challenge well. Many social issues have paralyzed progress and disunified society. In his writings, Abdu'l-Baha set the high Baha'i standard for achieving human unity:

… each of the creatures is a sign of God, and it was by the grace of the Lord and His power that each did step into the world; therefore they are not strangers, but in the family; not aliens, but friends, and to be treated as such. Wherefore must the loved ones of God associate in affectionate fellowship with stranger and friend alike, showing forth to all the utmost loving-kindness, disregarding the degree of their capacity, never asking whether they deserve to be loved.

Several social issues have caused rifts in our societies, contributing to disharmony and divisions among people. In some cases, these differences have created estrangement, misunderstanding, hatred, and violence. Let's look at three of these issues and ponder a few possible solutions.

Mental and Emotional Health

The pace and pressure of modern life has created an increase in the number of people with anxiety, depression, and other mental disorders. Millions of people suffer from these illnesses. Sadly, most societies and communities attach a stigma to people with mental and emotional conditions, which makes their lives much more complicated and obstructs their hope of being healed.

Fortunately, health professionals and people from all walks of life increasingly understand the importance of mental health. Many societies worldwide have begun to recognize the impact of these problems. The well-known athletes and celebrities who openly admit that they struggle with their mental health provide society with a healthy sign because their openness signals that emotional health is more important than fame, medals, and trophies – and permits more people to recognize the importance of their mental health.

Humanity has long dealt with emotional issues at every level in every profession, but the general advice has been to "toughen up." That approach, which fails to address the gravity of the problem and then forcibly tries to push people through the pain and stress, doesn't work.

Instead, physical and emotional illnesses require effort to overcome, and having patience is a great asset in facing these challenges. Improvements take time, and patience helps you survive the difficulties one day at a time. This is where communities can show their support – with tolerance, love, and acceptance playing a tremendous role in easing the struggles and suffering of those souls who suffer from these afflictions.

Emotional and mental problems can be remedied temporarily with the help of medicine, but the question remains whether they sufficiently address the origin or the causes of these issues. The future direction of solutions to mental and emotional challenges is essential for humanity's happiness, well-being, and progress. We must widen our horizons and recognize that people who suffer from emotional and mental health challenges need more than medicine and professional help – they need our love and understanding as part of our human family. By helping them, we allow ourselves to build a caring and loving community.

Integrating the Elderly

In many Western societies, older people are segregated in "senior" communities and nursing homes. In doing so, we've lost the treasures of their experience and wisdom, which can serve the younger generations who need it so desperately.

In other cultures, the elderly are looked upon with respect and reverence as great resources for everyone younger. But in the global West, except in traditional Indigenous cultures, elders are often seen as a burden on families and social programs.

Our culture — especially social media — gives the impression that the world revolves around the young. Hollywood reinforces the idea that the world is a playground for the young. Perhaps that's why it's hard to imagine a productive place for the elderly in modern society. It often seems like every movie, television show, and commercial (except the pharmaceutical ones) cater exclusively to the young.

This represents such a contrast to my awareness as a Baha'i that our souls never age. The body's condition should not distract us from nurturing the soul, no matter how old we are. Our elders have been separated from society to take care of their physical needs efficiently, and their spiritual and human needs have been overlooked.

We should approach older people as spiritual beings, regardless of their physical frailties. There is so much that can be accomplished through our elders' resources and wisdom — if only society could begin to see them in the right light. Rather than allowing them to waste away in sanitized homes where dreams die faster than bodies, we should provide them with the means to achieve goals they may have set for their golden years. The Baha'i International Community's statement on this reality says:

… there must be full integration of the aging in the human community, since the community should be an extended family in which everyone, of any age, is an essential part, and not only allowed, but encouraged, to make the fullest possible contribution to the well-being of the whole … in considering the needs of the aging in the process of development we must take into account the wholeness of the human being, the moral and spiritual dimension, besides his emotional, intellectual, and physical nature when discussing the special contributions of older persons to development and their sharing in the resulting benefits.

So let's reverse course – rather than segregating seniors, let's integrate elders into the community's day-to-day life. Let's change our mindset to see elders as a source of untapped wisdom and knowledge.

Youth and Our Future

The younger generations increasingly pay the price for the mistakes of the older generations. In pursuit of material gain, the previous generations sacrificed natural resources and beauty. We damaged the environment without considering the future of the planet. We left the harmful legacy of global warming for our children to tackle. The younger generations – with a dimmer future, less job security, and fewer opportunities to live comfortably and more securely – will continue to struggle with the legacy we leave them.

In most cultures and societies, it's all too common for older people not to trust the judgment of younger people – but that prejudice ignores some of the insight and courage of younger generations. The Universal House of Justice, the global governing body of the Baha'i Faith, addressed the world's youth by saying: "**Undoubtedly, it is within your power to contribute significantly to shaping the societies of the coming century; youth can move the world.**"

Young people today do not want to repeat past mistakes by overemphasizing the achievement of wealth at any cost or as the main reason for living. Previous generations missed the spiritual and moral goals to offset the damage created by excess material progress. This lust for material progress has brought us to such a critical state that younger generations feel there will be no future left for them to enjoyy. Their cries and protests can now be heard all over the world.

The world's present problems have overwhelmed us because our solutions are outdated and ineffective. The planet needs a new and fundamental change in its outlook and approach to tackling the ever-increasing crises we face – and that change will come from young people.

The recent challenges of our time have awakened the youth and brought forward many individuals who have exemplified passion, wisdom, and devotion to such an extent that they inspire admiration. Our future depends on the insight, creativity, and active involvement of the younger generations – so let's encourage and support them!

The Life Lesson a Little Lost Bird Taught Me

I'm a bird lover who has had many birds as pets – and I even let them fly around the house! But I'll admit I'm not a fan of Starlings. They come in great numbers, like a gang of ruffians, and attack my orchard.

In a few minutes, the ravenous starling gang destroys the results of my hard work in the fruit orchard and leaves a devastating scene behind. They eat and throw away my black cherries, my black and white prized mulberries, and my figs.

I spend much of my summer rushing out of the sunroom into the garden to shoo them away. Recently, the frantic sound of their chirping urgently propelled me into the garden to discourage them once more. Irritated, I clapped hard and threw water at the big cherry tree, thinking they were in there decimating my cherries, even though I couldn't see the birds. Despite my efforts, the chirping continued, and I felt helpless in defending my fruit.

This went on for a couple of days. I could still hear their loud voices, but I couldn't find them. On the third day, in the early morning, I heard very close to me the sound of movement in the wall of my bathroom. My house is 110 years old, with many places where different creatures can enter for a visit, so I've accepted that I must co-exist with them. I listened carefully, realizing the sound was behind the wall. The noise sounded like a bird flapping its wings.

After some thought, I concluded that it could be a bird that had fallen through, meaning there was probably a nest in the attic. I knew it must be the pesky starlings nesting there, their babies torturing me with their cries and getting ready to grow up and destroy more of my fruit. So I took a flashlight and went to the dark, narrow attic, where I could hear the chirping.
There he was, a loud mouthpiece with eyes closed and beak open, making a scene. I lifted the little guy, and he tried to bite me, wanting to get away. I felt angry and confused – my enemy in my house at my mercy. I'm trying to save him, but he's fighting me. How dare he? Who does this little thing think he is?

With a little distaste, I put the loudmouth chick on the floor, thinking the parents would take care of him. Later, when no parents appeared, I realized that two chicks were left hungry and out of the nest, one in my bathroom wall where I could do nothing to reach him. Because that one no longer made any sound, I assumed that he had died shortly after.

On my next visit to the attic, I found the nest on a platform half a meter from the floor. The nest was not deep, and any movement of the chicks would have caused them to fall. That's exactly what happened, I reasoned.

Knowing all this, I felt terrible about the chick's death and wanted to do something for his surviving sibling. Despite my dislike for starlings, I decided to take care of him, remembering these words of Abdu'l-Baha: "**Ye must not only have kind and merciful feelings for mankind, but ye should also exercise the utmost kindness towards every living creature.**"

So, I went up to the attic once more. I looked for him and could hear him but could not see him.

He had apparently found his way under the attic floor insulation – which meant I couldn't reach him, either! Frustrated, I returned to the attic several times. I could hear him, which made me miserable since I couldn't help him. I felt he was calling me for help, and since his parents had abandoned him, I was his only savior.

He was a bundle of energy during the next few days, crying loudly and continuously without breaks. It tore my heart out. I did not know what to do except repeat, "I am so sorry, I cannot help you," or "It's not my fault that your parents built a bad nest!" I talked to him to ease my conscience. I felt there was a lesson in this for me, but I didn't yet know what kind of lesson.

Maybe that little fledgling starling was born to teach me a lesson about the love and preciousness of life.

Hearing his non-stop cries for help and being unable to do anything, I was in emotional hell, and I knew the end was coming. My misery knew no limits since now I clearly understood the agonizing end of my unwanted guest – who I now deeply cared for and wished for. I prayed for his survival, which was impossible because I could hear that he had now fallen behind the wall behind the bathtub.

In my mind, I called him the "Little Fighter," who would not give up easily. I cannot describe the change in my feeling from indifference when I first held him in my hand to now sincerely praying for his survival.
His cries mercifully stopped the following day, and as I pondered this sad event and tried to find the lesson in it, I realized that the little lost bird had taught me that the gift of life is precious and worth fighting for. He also taught me not to hate the starlings that destroy my fruit. Like all of us, they want to live and need to eat, and since they can't buy food from the store, they eat it from the trees – my trees included. I learned that I can still love even those people and creatures I wrongly perceive as enemies.

I thank my Little Fighter for showing me that I am still emotionally alive, capable of loving and changing my attitude. In his short life span of a few days, he triggered emotions I did not know I had, reminding me to follow this advice from the Baha'i teachings: "**Therefore one must be very considerate towards animals and show greater kindness to them than to man.**"

Spiritual Capital: Investing Our Energies Wisely

In the world of finance, investment is important – our entire economy depends on it. Let's look at the definition of investment to determine the similarities between our financial and spiritual investments.

The encyclopedia of investment, Investopedia, says:

Investing, broadly, is putting money to work for a period of time in some sort of project or undertaking in order to generate positive returns (i.e., profits that exceed the amount of the initial investment). It is the act of allocating resources, usually capital, with the expectation of generating income, profit, or gains. One can invest in many types of endeavours.
But beyond putting money to work, we also have the opportunity in this life to make spiritual investments – as these two quotations by Baha'u'llah from the Baha'i writings testify:

"All praise and glory be to God Who, through the power of His might, hath delivered His creation from the nakedness of non-existence, and clothed it with the mantle of life. From among all created things He hath singled out for His special favor the pure, the gem-like reality of man, and invested it with a unique capacity of knowing Him and of reflecting the greatness of His glory.
O servant of God! With a pure heart unloose thy tongue in the praise of thy Lord for having made mention of thee through His gem-scattering pen. Couldst thou but realize the greatness of this bestowal, thou wouldst find thyself invested with everlasting life."

The "positive return" on those spiritual investments, which the Baha'i teachings describe so beautifully, is everlasting life.

Of course, human history is full of examples of good investments and bad investments, and sadly, humanity still makes very profitable yet incredibly unjust investments – a prime example being the investment in making weapons of war.

When we invest our capital in weapons, in bullets and in bombs, President Dwight Eisenhower said in 1953, we hang humanity from "a cross of iron:"

Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed.
This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities. It is two electric

power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 population. It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals. It is some fifty miles of concrete pavement. We pay for a single fighter with a half-million bushels of wheat. We pay for a single destroyer with new homes that could have housed more than 8,000 people. … This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.

In the spiritual sphere, our soul and mind's energies represent our precious capital, and our physical life span on this Earth defines the duration of the investment. Our goal for return on our capital is not only to have an everlasting life for the individual but also to achieve the oneness of humanity, built by love and unity. This kind of investment asks how we can further those goals with our character and souls and how to make those investments more effective by purifying our intentions. We invest our limited and precious capital wisely to bring the best return in this world and in the next, fully aware that thoughtful investment is the key.

Sadly, when it comes to our spiritual energies, many may have no plan and haphazardly throw them in any direction – or they make a terrible investment by abusing those energies, which creates far more problems than it solves, harming ourselves, our families, friends, and the community itself.

The root cause of that poor investment is a lack of self-knowledge, which opens the door for selfish desires to replace well-intended energies. Some of these actions may be primarily unintentional, but they hurt the individual and the community and become counterproductive.

To avoid these dangers, knowledge of some prerequisites can help us navigate life's stormy waters.

The mismanagement of our spiritual energies, which are gifts from the Creator, is sadly one of the biggest tragedies of life – because well-meaning efforts due to the lack of fundamental principles of selflessness, empathy, caring, and love can translate into disunity, arguments, and adverse effects on the mind.

I've observed, in my years of working in communities in different parts of the world, that those that exemplify their ideologies and deep spiritual principles of faith, without having mastered the principles of administration or organization, tend to function better than communities where the emphasis is on the administration at the cost of the spirit of the faith. This loving spirit in which the work and efforts were rendered usually proves to be a wise investment of their energies.

Before doing anything, we must go to the basics of any faith, understand them, and apply them to our daily lives so that they become part of our souls. Only then can we proclaim our beliefs, with or without words, and hope that our actions will speak louder than our words, significantly affecting the observers.

Our fast, modern life and its formulas for success have deprived us of enough time to

meditate and plan for investing our spiritual energies, which has led to many problems in the world. The easy way to invest materially or spiritually does not necessarily lead to great returns; if we do not sacrifice a little, we do not deserve the returns.

Our scarce and precious human and spiritual energies deserve recognition and attention to be wisely invested with great care since our lives are not long enough to correct our mistakes and start again continually. In the blink of an eye, this life will be over, and we will answer to our Creator what we have done with His gift of life and spirit.

The Only Solution to Our Economic Problems: The Oneness of Humanity

Many economists have pointed out the importance of global unity and cooperation in solving the ever-increasing world economic crises. But there has not been much change, and time is running out.

Time is running out for governments, economists, and policymakers to make a change to undo the economic miseries they have knowingly or unknowingly afflicted upon billions of people.

Our global economy is faced today with a wide range of critical issues — natural resources, the environment, migration and refugees, wars and disputes, climate change, communication and transportation, dire poverty, control of future viruses and diseases, and most importantly, the development of sustainable peace and harmony between people and nations.

How do we successfully deal with these important issues? Based on the Baha'i writings, the solution is for humanity to unite. In a speech he gave in Paris in 1911, Abdu'l-Baha said:

… direct your thoughts towards the unity of mankind; that you will never harm your neighbours nor speak ill of any one; that you will respect the rights of all men, and be more concerned for the interests of others than for your own.

This suggestion — the unification of humanity — isn't just a fancy slogan. It represents the only solution for humanity's long-term survival, for implementing remedies to rectify our political, economic, and environmental crises.

Personally, I've sounded that very same message for decades, but I recently remembered the story of a father and his sons, which illustrates the principle beautifully. Some of you may know the story. It goes like this:

An old Man had several Sons who were constantly fighting with each other. He used every means to persuade them to stop their contentions and unite, to no effect. Finally, he did the following: He asked his sons to come and bring a small bundle of sticks and then told them to try to break it with all their strength. They all tried, but without any success, for the sticks were closely bound together, and the force of one of them couldn't break them. After this, the father ordered the bundle to be opened and gave each of his Sons a single stick while asking them to try to break it. This they did with ease and soon snapped every stick. The father then addressed them, saying: O, my Sons, behold the power of unity!

In a speech he gave in Paris, Abdu'l-Baha explained the benefits of unity for a single home or for the whole world:

Note ye how easily, where unity existeth in a given family, the affairs of that family are conducted; what progress the members of that family make, how they prosper in the world. Their concerns are in order, they enjoy comfort and tranquillity, they are secure, their position is assured, they come to be envied by all. Such a family but addeth to its stature and its lasting honour, as day succeedeth day. And if we widen out the sphere of unity a little to include the inhabitants of a village who seek to be loving and united, who associate with and are kind to one another, what great advances they will be seen to make, how secure and protected they will be. Then let us widen out the sphere a little more, let us take the inhabitants of a city, all of them together: if they establish the strongest bonds of unity among themselves, how far they will progress, even in a brief period and what power they will exert. And if the sphere of unity be still further widened out, that is, if the inhabitants of a whole country develop peaceable hearts, and if with all their hearts and souls they yearn to cooperate with one another and to live in unity, and if they become kind and loving to one another, that country will achieve undying joy and lasting glory. Peace will it have, and plenty, and vast wealth.

Despite their efforts, national governments have failed to accept that nationally based solutions for solving the planet's economic problems ignore the fundamental fact that no single country can solve all its economic problems alone. We live in an interdependent world , meaning we need a global approach to solving global problems.
Every day, nations struggle with limited success in making their economies answer the pressing questions of poverty and inequality present in both capitalist and socialist systems. The ingredient missing in their process — the lack of vision of seeing each other as members of one human family — makes their limited solutions ineffective. Without this vision and with the logic of profit at any cost being a system's only goal, the problems inevitably accumulate.

Let's face it — our economic problems are due to a lack of human values and morality in our economic systems, policies, and activities. We've tried to divorce economics from the human spirit, and that approach simply doesn't work. As a result, the world's problems become more prominent.

The solution must be a united front despite all the differences between countries. This will not be simple or easy, but it will work. Abdu'l-Baha acknowledged the differences and difficulties in achieving unity and suggested a solution to overcome them:

It is self-evident that humanity is at variance. Human tastes differ; thoughts, native lands, races and tongues are many. The need of a collective center by which these differences may be counterbalanced and the people of the world be unified is obvious. Consider how nothing but a spiritual power can bring about this unification, for material conditions and mental aspects are so widely different that agreement and unity are not possible through outer means. It is possible, however, for all to become

unified through one spirit, just as all may receive light from one sun. Therefore, assisted by the collective and divine center which is the law of God and the reality of His Manifestation, we can overcome these conditions until they pass away entirely and the races advance.

Suppose we don't change our attitudes and unite to solve the problems. In that case, the problems will accumulate. Without solutions, they will likely reach the stage of social unrest, when the poor and underprivileged will find no other way of economic survival except fighting for it. That should be a warning to governments and the rich to change their mindsets and start seeing fellow humans as members of the same family, finding ways to eliminate their economic miseries. This resonates with the Baha'i teachings. In *The Baha'i World*, Volume 4, Abdu'l-Baha said, "**The secrets of the whole economic question are Divine in nature, and are concerned with the world of the heart and spirit.**"

Clearly, we are stronger and much more effective when we combine our energies and resources to solve humanity's problems. The Baha'i teachings assure us that unity and the oneness of humanity will happen, but sadly, it may only happen as our last chance of survival in a devastated world. I hope and pray that it happens instead due to humanity's spiritual awakening to the Creator's divine solutions.

My Two Baha’i Communities

As a Baha'i, I put a lot of energy into my Baha'i community’s activities. Also, I am very involved with the community at large, which creates a conflict within me.
Have you ever had an inner dilemma like this? Do you have one group of friends you love and another group you also love, but the two groups don’t often meet?

My continued involvement in the larger community has gone on for years – but still I haven’t figured out a solution to my unsettled feelings that I’m falling short as a Baha'i. Lately, I’ve been trying to simplify this dilemma in order to fully grasp it.

I suppose it all comes down to how we define each other. After all, who is a Baha'i, a Christian, a Muslim, a Hindu, a Buddhist or an atheist? What about those who do not believe in or belong to any organized religion?

Recently, after reading a quotation from the Baha'i teachings from a talk Abdu’l-Baha gave in London, the light came on, and a realization hit me. I realized I have two Baha’i communities and not just one:

It makes no difference whether you have ever heard of Baha’u’llah or not … the man who lives the life according to the Teachings of Baha’u’llah is already a Baha'i. On the other hand a man may call himself a Baha’i for fifty years and if he does not live the life he is not a Baha'i.

The Baha'i teachings recognize that it does not matter what you call yourself; your actions speak. This applies to people of all religions and ideologies, emphasizing the actions and not the followers’ claims.

This new realization helped free me, and I experienced a joy I had not felt for a long time. The sense of loneliness of living in a small Baha'i community was transformed into a vision of myself as part of a huge community in which I worked and volunteered, meeting so many beautiful souls and endeavouring for the betterment of the world.

This realization changed my entire view of what community means to me.

I now feel that I belong to a bigger community, including thousands of people with whom I share a common cause, who are a vital part of my life and have become my extended family members.

My newfound freedom inspired me to write this essay to remind myself of the remedy for dealing with loneliness. Loneliness is the great killer in the world, attacking the souls of millions. Your family, the Baha'i teachings assure us, is the entire human race. Go out, meet them, and forget your loneliness.

Am I an optimist who ignores the realities all around him, realities like the world is falling apart and misery is all around, in which poverty, wars, conflicts and the spread of misinformation take hope away from millions? I don't think so. My optimistic view comes from reading the Baha'i writings, with Baha'u'llah's promise of the inevitable oneness of humanity, which will solve our problems and ensure a bright future:

The utterance of God is a lamp, whose light is these words: Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. Deal ye one with another with the utmost love and harmony, with friendliness and fellowship. He Who is the Daystar of Truth beareth Me witness! So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth. The One true God, He Who knoweth all things, Himself testifieth to the truth of these words. Exert yourselves that ye may attain this transcendent and most sublime station, the station that can insure the protection and security of all mankind. This goal excelleth every other goal, and this aspiration is the monarch of all aspirations.

When religion is just a label or an inheritance, it is taken lightly and accepted without investigation or thought. When followers of different religions identify with a sense of pride that they belong to a faith and are ready to kill or be killed, they are ignorant of the fundamental principles of their Faith as written in their Holy Books.

I try never to fall into those categories – my Faith reminds me of the essence of being a Baha'i. Abdu'l-Baha wrote:

… "Baha'i" is not just a name but a truth. Every child must be trained in the things of the spirit, so that he may embody all the virtues and become a source of glory to the Cause of God. Otherwise, the mere word "Baha'i", if it yield no fruit, will come to nothing.

These wise passages have joyfully helped me realize now that I have two Baha'i communities. One is my life in the context of my Faith through meetings, celebrations, study, and prayer. My "other" Baha'i community is one that lives and exemplifies the spiritual teachings of the Baha'i Faith – and of all Faiths, since all religions, in essence, have the same message of love, oneness and service to others.

This awareness has encouraged me to perceive like-minded friends, colleagues, and neighbors who live a Baha'i life as my fellow Baha'is. What a blessing to belong to two communities that may look different on the surface but are the same in the spirit.

When crises engulf the world, when hope for the future diminishes, the Baha'i writings remind us of the oneness of religion – and that just naming one's Faith without following its teachings makes a meaningless and false claim. Humanity is one family created by the same God of all religions, no matter what name God is called.

Our human family awaits your involvement in connecting and building a bright future. The future of humanity rests upon us, and if we can face all the challenges with love, cooperation, and unity, we can learn to see all religions as one and humanity as one diverse family.

How Should We Measure the Span of Our Lives?

The sad death of my 33-year-old sweet and gentle nephew, the only son of my sister, who had just been married and was very dear to me, challenged me to grasp the wisdom of his death at such a young age. His death forced me to think not only about the concept of death but also about the concept of measuring our lives with man-made measuring tools of days and years.

The fact that some souls leave this physical world earlier than others is considered sad, and the reason behind this is just seeing the small number of years they spend in this physical existence rather than thinking about how they have used their time while they were alive.

Humanity invented the concept of time, based on the earth's rotation, called it a day, and the earth going around the sun, called it a year and used it to measure life's span. It is a tangible tool to count the span of our life here on earth, and it serves this purpose well. However, inherent in this emphasis on our life span is the assumption that having more years is life's goal. But I do not think God sees it the same way or judges us that way.

Baha'ullah reminds us of the shortness of our lives and how to prepare before the hour of our death:

"Live then the days of thy life, that are less than a fleeting moment, with thy mind stainless, thy heart unsullied, thy thoughts pure, and thy nature sanctified, so that, free and content, thou mayest put away this mortal frame, and repair unto the mystic paradise and abide in the eternal kingdom for evermore."

An emphasis on the material side of life has pushed humanity into adopting tools for measuring the material aspect of our lives, and by that, adding to humanity's confusion and waywardness, where spiritual values are traded for physical values. The reality is that our number of years or the number of times the earth goes around the sun does not guarantee a spiritual and fulfilling life to be adequate to go to the next world awaiting us all.

Abdu'l-Baha points out that we are above the traits of our physical needs:

"The span of his existence will pass away in eating, drinking and sleeping, without eternal fruits, heavenly traces or illumination -- without spiritual potency, everlasting life or the lofty attainments intended for him during his pilgrimage through the human world.."

To console my sister, I shared my theory about some souls who have left this world early. I thought of this world as a testing ground and a school of learning with its teacher who teaches us what is good and evil and leaves us to study and practice what we have learned, with the knowledge that at the end of our lives, there will be an exam to determine what grade we will go to next. I told my sister that maybe her son had excelled in his studies since he was a gentle and innocent soul, and God must have thought that he had aced all his courses and had graduated, so He sent him to his next grade while we stayed back, requiring more work before we could move on. Also, I sent this prayer that Abdu'l-Baha had written to a woman who had lost her young son:

"From the death of that beloved youth due to his separation from you the utmost sorrow and grief has been occasioned, for he flew away in the flower of his age and the bloom of his youth, to the heavenly nest.

But as he has been freed from this sorrow-stricken shelter and has turned his face toward the everlasting nest of the Kingdom and has been delivered from a dark and narrow world and has hastened to the sanctified realm of Light, therein lies the consolation of our hearts.

The inscrutable divine wisdom underlies such heart-rending occurrences. It is as if a kind gardener transfers a fresh and tender shrub from a narrow place to a vast region. This transference is not the cause of the withering, the waning or the destruction of that shrub, nay rather it makes it grow and thrive, acquire freshness and delicacy and attain verdure and fruition. This hidden secret is well-known to the gardener, while those souls who are unaware of this bounty suppose that the gardener in his anger and wrath has uprooted the shrub. But to those who are aware this concealed fact is manifest and this predestined decree considered a favor."

And so it seems that death is not necessarily a bad thing since we all have to die, and also, our lives are not about the number of times the earth goes around the sun; instead, they are about what we do with God's given gift of life.

This realization was based on a talk I had with a young man who had come to speak to a group of offenders in a treatment centre I used to work in years ago. He was addressing the harm caused by drugs.

This young man had AIDS and had a few months to live. After his talk, he permitted me to ask him a personal question. I asked him how he was dealing and feeling about his imminent death. He said that for many years, he had been a drug addict living on the street shooting drugs, and if it had not been for getting AIDS, he would have continued doing it. Then he said he would not trade these few months he had left helping others not to repeat his mistakes for anything in the world. He had realized that it is not the number of years that matters but how we use it that is important.

Abdu'l-Baha explains what we should be focusing on in our short lives:

"The fleeting hours of man's life on earth pass swiftly by and the little that still remaineth shall come to an end, but that which endureth and lasteth for evermore is the fruit that man reapeth from his servitude at the Divine Threshold. "

I am unsure if my attempts to console my sister, who lives continents away from me, succeeded. Still, it made me reflect on the remaining number of earth's rotations left for me to prepare for my journey to the spiritual world, where the concept of time has a different meaning.

Children Need Both Kinds of Education: Material and Spiritual

Years of involvement with educational systems, and even starting an overseas school years ago, have led me to this question: does our education system serve every aspect of our children's' lives?

Education isn't simply about memorizing facts – it's about discovering the hidden talents and potential of children and youth, teaching them to think for themselves, and giving them what they need to choose the right path.

In other words, education means awakening students to their potential so that they can take charge of their lives.

This quotation from Baha'u'llah has been my guiding light in navigating the tricky and complicated educational system: "**Regard man as a mine rich in gems of inestimable value. Education can, alone, cause it to reveal its treasures, and enable mankind to benefit therefrom.**" If, as Baha'u'llah said, we can unearth those gems from within our students' minds and hearts, we've done our job as educators.

In the past and even now, in some places in the world, children were traditionally sent to a master or guru to learn. They were taught the basic facts of being human by emphasizing moral and spiritual values, and once that was achieved, then the master would proceed to teach them mathematics and sciences – because human and spiritual values were considered the foundation for building a life.

Sadly, in many educational systems, we now teach without consideration for such a foundation and its ongoing maintenance.

In many places, education no longer satisfies both sides of our being, the material and the human – because we've adopted one-sided systems that put great stress on material success. The whole education system is geared to create skills that allow us to succeed in the material world and little or no effort is put in place to encourage achieving the higher goal of becoming a better human being, creating a healthy balance between the material and the spiritual.

The whole goal of education – to develop human potential – requires a balanced outlook. Some of that education, of course, must first take place at home, as the Baha'i teachings point out:

Every child is potentially the light of the world — and at the same time its darkness; wherefore must the question of education be accounted as of primary importance. From his infancy, the child must be nursed at the breast of God's love, and nurtured in the embrace of His knowledge, that he may radiate light, grow in spirituality, be filled with wisdom and learning, and take on the characteristics of the angelic host.

When children do begin to attend school, however, the development of human and moral potential is not part of the education system's focus, and it is not even the focus for most parents when the goal set for their children involves succeeding materially. The concept of planning for a prosperous and balanced economic and moral life is almost unheard of and is ignored.

I understand the need for and importance of material success, but the question is, at what cost? In most cases, the price is neglecting the importance of developing the potential of our souls.

In our worldly, materially-centered way of living, our goals have shifted from developing human and spiritual potential to creating individuals skilled in navigating the competitive world of the job market and landing jobs with high salaries and good benefits. However, even the education system's success in teaching essential facts of management of the material side is questionable. One of my ex-students told me that she was robbed of 12 years of her life spent in school because she did not learn the basics of how to manage her finances.

There is nothing wrong with being financially successful: having a profession, degrees, skills, and wealth, as long as we remember that our degrees, work, and wealth do not define who we are. In our materialistic world, who you are spiritually and morally is secondary to what you have, whether a degree, a big bank balance, or the number of cars and houses you own, which have become superficial indicators or yardsticks for measuring life's success.

Our life's priorities have become one-sided. They cover the physical aspect of our lives, but they do not deal with our existence's human and spiritual sides. The Baha'i teachings urge us to look at life differently – to see it not only through a material lens but also with a spiritual vision. Abdu'l-Baha, in a speech he gave in Paris, said:

It is indeed a good and praiseworthy thing to progress materially, but in so doing, let us not neglect the more important spiritual progress, and close our eyes to the Divine light shining in our midst.

Only by improving spiritually as well as materially can we make any real progress, and become perfect beings.

Various religions in the world have offered religious schools. Still, sadly, some of them emphasize the supposed supremacy of one religion over others, presenting their religion as the only way to God or salvation, which leads to fanaticism, alienation, and division, destroying the potential of their students.

However, lately, educators have raised awareness of the need for change, and some educational and religious institutions have attempted to incorporate morality and spirituality into their curricula.

Every child is full of gifts from the Creator, and education's role involves developing those gifts and allowing them to shine, discovering the real meaning of a prosperous and balanced life – of progressing materially and progressing in acquiring human and spiritual values.

After all, many people who gain vast wealth in this physical realm are bound to realize at the end of their lives that they must leave all possessions behind when they die. On the other hand, the spiritual and moral growth made during a lifetime does not disappear when our human souls transcend this realm, creating great satisfaction that life spent on acquiring the deeper human and spiritual virtues prepared us for the next stage of our existence.

From Enriching the Shareholders to Serving the Stakeholders

The economic systems in our world, where the gap between the extremely poor and the super-rich grows wider by the minute, leave billions of fellow human beings struggling to survive. This is unjust.

Many ideas and discussions have been advanced about how to solve these problems, and different economic systems have been passionately analyzed in detail and tried by various nations – with no solution in sight. The problem of the growing gap between the wealthy and the poor has not subsided. Instead, it has gotten worse.

As is my habit, I try to simplify the problem to grasp it better and not get lost in the ocean of data and details. I have realized that in almost all cases, most for-profit companies or firms aim to please the shareholders and not the people they eventually affect.

To clarify this concept, let's first define the two terms.

Shareholder: A person or institution that has invested money in a corporation in exchange for a "share" of the ownership.

Stakeholder: A person or a group with a vested interest or stake in the decision-making and activities of a business, organization, or project. Based on these criteria, stakeholders often include customers, employees, investors, and suppliers – and ultimately, all of society.

For simplicity, let's use the term "shareholders" to represent the self-interest that has been the driving force or the engine of the predominant capitalist systems in the world. That term, after all, was suggested by Adam Smith, who has been called by many the father of capitalism.

Let's use the term "stakeholders" to symbolize the welfare of the public — the ordinary members of a community or country who the economic system tries to serve. An equitable and just economic system should aim to achieve welfare, happiness, and financial security for all rather than increase share prices or increase profits for the sole benefit of the few.

One of the primary principles of the Baha'i teachings – a spiritual solution to the world's economic problems – asks humanity to achieve unity and justice by eliminating the great disparities between the wealthy and the poor:

The government of the countries should conform to the Divine Law which gives equal justice to all. This is the only way in which the deplorable superfluity of great wealth and miserable, demoralizing, degrading poverty can be abolished. Not until this is done will the Law of God be obeyed.

To accomplish those lofty goals, there must be a fundamental shift in our thinking process and vision. The different institutions of the world must change their direction to a new one motivated by human and spiritual values.

This shift in the world's mindset implies seeing the bigger picture and the whole of humanity rather than a small portion of society who have accumulated a vast majority of the financial resources. We must also revisit and revise the wasteful expenditures on war industries and military might, redirecting them to humanitarian purposes and the advancement of sciences that promote the well-being of all humanity.

In his book *The World Order of Baha'u'llah*, the Guardian of the Baha'i Faith, Shoghi Effendi, outlined the hopeful, positive Baha'i vision of a unified, demilitarized, and economically equitable world, saying that the Baha'i teachings will help bring it about:

The economic resources of the world will be organized, its sources of raw materials will be tapped and fully utilized, its markets will be coordinated and developed, and the distribution of its products will be equitably regulated.

… The enormous energy dissipated and wasted on war, whether economic or political, will be consecrated to such ends as will extend the range of human inventions and technical development, to the increase of the productivity of mankind, to the extermination of disease, to the extension of scientific research, to the raising of the standard of physical health, to the sharpening and refinement of the human brain, to the exploitation of the unused and unsuspected resources of the planet, to the prolongation of human life, and to the furtherance of any other agency that can stimulate the intellectual, the moral, and spiritual life of the entire human race.

As the economic problems of the world increase and the intensity of our multiple crises increases with it, humanity has to face the reality that the scope of the world's problems has reached a level beyond the ability of our current system of national sovereignty to resolve. A new, world-unifying approach and a new way of looking for a solution is needed – a realization that spiritual and moral values must be included in the formulation and application of the system that can remedy the diseases of our ailing human society.

The Baha'i teachings understand that two kinds of human civilization exist – material and spiritual – and achieving a balance between the two comprises the solution. Abdu'l-Baha explained this concept beautifully:

… among the teachings of Baha'u'llah is that although material civilization is one of the means for the progress of the world of mankind, yet until it becomes combined with Divine civilization, the desired result, which is the felicity of mankind, will not be attained. Consider! ... all these weapons of war are the malignant fruits of material civilization. Had material civilization been combined with Divine civilization, these fiery weapons would never have been invented. Nay, rather, human energy would have been wholly devoted to useful inventions and would have been concentrated on praiseworthy discoveries. Material civilization is like a lamp-glass. Divine civilization is the lamp itself and the glass without the light is dark. Material civilization is like the body. No matter how infinitely graceful, elegant and beautiful it may be, it is dead. Divine civilization is like the spirit, and the body gets its life from the spirit, otherwise it becomes a corpse. It has thus been made evident that the world of mankind is in need of the breaths of the Holy Spirit. Without the spirit the world of mankind is lifeless, and without this light the world of mankind is in utter darkness. For the world of nature is an animal world. Until man is born again from the world of nature, that is to say, becomes detached from the world of nature, he is essentially an animal, and it is the teachings of God which convert this animal into a human soul.

The history of purely capitalist economics, with its focus on profit at any cost and with little attention paid to the plight of the poor, has created this extreme disparity between the "haves" and "have nots" that threatens to de-stabilize our entire world. It is time to rethink our assumptions about our economic systems, emphasize the needs of the stakeholders over the shareholders, and start building a more just and equitable global system by introducing human, moral, and spiritual values.

How to Seek the Truth in a Sea of Misinformation

We live now in the midst of an outrage war – one politician or another, in different parts of the world, lashes out with great anger, strong words, and untruths, and the backlash builds as if on a battlefield.

Sure, we can blame the politicians for all the outrage, but no one wants to admit that these individuals are the by-products of our time. They result from humanity's choices and our collective failure to seek the truth.

These outrages and grievances, and the individuals who give voice to them, are gaining popularity and momentum due to our inability to discern reality. We have elected them; we pay attention to them; we give them a free pass; as a result, they spread misinformation, outrage, and even hatred with the speed of light, wrapping a blindfold around many people's eyes and souls.

This widespread glut of misinformation and lies has now extended into multiple aspects of our lives, eating away at humanity's fundamental realities. It has paralyzed so many that they have lost hope for the future. People feel confused about what to believe and struggle to find the truth.

The root cause, the Baha'i teachings point out, is a lack of spirituality, morality, and proper education.

This passage from the writings of Baha'u'llah, the prophet and founder of the Baha'i Faith, provides a clear explanation of the problem – and the realization that an alternative course of action has always been open to humanity:

The vitality of men's belief in God is dying out in every land; nothing short of His wholesome medicine can ever restore it. The corrosion of ungodliness is eating into the vitals of human society; what else but the Elixir of His potent Revelation can cleanse and revive it? Is it within human power … to effect in the constituent elements of any of the minute and indivisible particles of matter so complete a transformation as to transmute it into purest gold? Perplexing and difficult as this may appear, the still greater task of converting satanic strength into heavenly power is one that We have been empowered to accomplish. The force capable of such a

transformation transcendeth the potency of the Elixir itself. The Word of God, alone, can claim the distinction of being endowed with the capacity required for so great and far-reaching a change.

From a Baha'i perspective, there are two forces at work in the world: the disintegrative forces eating into the foundations of the world's outdated institutions and values, and on the opposite side, the forces and agents of integration that are ready with a unifying vision of the future to build a better world for humanity.

Misinformation, lies, and exploitation by politicians and others are part of the process of disintegration, gradually tearing down society's old, outworn institutions. They constantly prove that the world needs a new start and a new set of values to take humanity out of our self-afflicted miseries toward a brighter future.

The evidence of this disintegration in all aspects of our lives is transparent to seekers of the truth. Still, it sadly remains hidden from those lost in the wilderness of misinformation and ignorance.

The Baha'i teachings proclaim that the Creator has given us each the ability to determine what is true and what is not, and it is up to us to use that ability. In a speech he gave in Massachusetts in 1912, Abdu'l-Baha said:

God has given man the eye of investigation by which he may see and recognize truth. He has endowed man with ears that he may hear the message of reality and conferred upon him the gift of reason by which he may discover things for himself. This is his endowment and equipment for the investigation of reality. Man is not intended to see through the eyes of another, hear through another's ears nor comprehend with another's brain. Each human creature has individual endowment, power and responsibility in the creative plan of God. Therefore, depend upon your own reason and judgment and adhere to the outcome of your own investigation; otherwise, you will be utterly submerged in the sea of ignorance and deprived of all the bounties of God.

Truth, however, isn't just a set of concrete circumstances – it goes far beyond mere facts and crosses into the realm of values. This means we must adopt principles or values that allow us to measure what is right and reject what is wrong. When we make these changes in our thinking and our approach to reality, they allow us to evolve to a higher level of understanding.

In the present environment, no one can afford the luxury of being indifferent. When we don't try to investigate the truth independently, we take on the easy, lazy attitude that allows lies to flourish.

If we want to base our lives on reality rather than fiction, we need to work hard for it, investing physical and spiritual energy in our investigation of the truth. We make wrong choices because of our confusion in seeing the truth. It requires real efforts to lead us in the right direction. Then, and only then, we can start discerning reality from falsehood, and become a lighthouse in the darkness of the ocean of confusion. So, in a way, this swimming through a sea of misinformation is a beautiful process that humanity is going through – painful, no doubt, but not necessarily without its benefits.

When we adopt a rigorous practice of separating fact from fiction and develop a set of spiritual principles and values to guide us through our existence's turbulent world, we can stand firm and face all the misinformation that comes our way. Misinformation, whose primary goal is to create confusion and mislead people, can be used to our advantage by improving our truth-seeking abilities and creating a yardstick to measure the truth in all aspects of our lives.

This positive attitude has been the hallmark of humanity down through the ages, so there is no reason we should give it up now. We can accept the challenges instead of blaming and cursing those who spread falsehoods, whether politicians or other public figures, so let us take on first the responsibility of educating ourselves and then lovingly and with patience educating and helping those lost in the sea of misinformation.

Ultimately, this hopefulness and positive attitude will save us from going down the road of hatred and division.

Why Divorce Should Be the Last Option

Before sharing my thoughts on this subject, I need to state that my intention is not to encourage people to stay in a bad or abusive relationship and suffer. That would be absolutely wrong. The intention is to make sure that separation is for the right reasons and that a couple have tried all avenues before deciding to separate.
The world is going through a very confusing time. It looks like the rug of morality and values has been pulled from under the foot of humanity and replaced by selfishness, self-centred attitudes and views that lead to less tolerance for others and finding the easiest way to get out of a bad situation as soon as possible.

I believe it is time to go back to the basics and fundamental principles and values of commitment to a relationship, reexamine our expectations and attitudes to avoid a lifetime of regrets, and realize that divorce is not the only solution for remedying problems in a relationship.

As morality and values lose their influence on people, the separation rate will increase without people realizing that problems will not be solved by changing partners and geographical locations. It requires self-reflection and openness to admit and accept one's part in the relationship's failure.

Divorce has been discouraged in all religious writings. Here are
the writings of Baha'u'llah outlining when divorce is allowed and how it should be granted:

Should resentment or antipathy arise between husband and wife, he is not to divorce her but to bide in patience throughout the course of one whole year, that perchance the fragrance of affection may be renewed between them. If, upon the completion of this period, their love hath not returned, it is permissible for divorce to take place.

I am sharing a few of my ideas on why divorce should be the last resort for ending a commitment with our life partners:

• View the relationship as a promise or serious commitment rather than a source of security and personal interest. A couple may take the marriage vows lightly and think it is just some pretty words and fail to realize that it is a promise, a covenant, and like every endeavour in life, it needs sacrifice and energy to protect and nurture this precious union that could last for eternity or at least, as the marriage vow says "until death do us part."
Baha'i marriage is the commitment of the two parties one to the other, and their mutual attachment of mind and heart. Each must, however, exercise the utmost care to become thoroughly acquainted with the character of the other, that the binding covenant between them may be a tie that will endure forever. Their purpose must be

this: to become loving companions and comrades and at one with each other for time and eternity.

• "Life is change, and change is life," and that conveys the idea that change is a natural part of life. Events such as illness, death in the family, financial changes or loss of employment can significantly impact our lives. Problems may be by-products of our environment. Failing to consider the changes and challenges that Mother Time has in store for us can shake the foundation of even strong relationships. Physical and emotional changes are natural and affect people, but they are not a good reason for separation.

• Acknowledge our part in creating problems rather than blaming everything on the spouse. This requires self-knowledge, which is essential for personal growth and relationships.

• Approach marriage from a spiritual point of view. The emphasis should be on the spiritual part of marriage and not just the material life. Abdu'l-Baha explains this:
O ye two believers in God! The Lord, peerless is He, hath made woman and man to abide with each other in the closest companionship, and to be even as a single soul. They are two helpmates, two intimate friends, who should be concerned about the welfare of each other.

• Hollywood and other movie industries and social media have distorted the concept of marriage by highlighting only the material aspects of marriage, such as the focus on physical attributes, with no attention to the moral and spiritual elements. It is not all romance; it is reality and requires hard work.

• It is essential to avoid the advice of those who are not in a position to judge and are biased and instead consult with the right people and institutions. During a crisis, one's sense of judgment gets clouded because of overwhelming emotions, which can lead to wrong decisions. This is when one needs more time for meditation and self-reflection, seeking advice from trusted sources and professional counsellors to make the right decisions. Bad advice in this situation can be disastrous, and good advice can save the relationship and avoid a crisis.

In conclusion, Baha'u'llah points out that God desires unity and harmony for humanity, and divorce is contrary to His wishes but allowed in extreme circumstances.

When the question of separation arises, two extreme courses of action are open to both parties. One is the infamous "see you in court," where the lawyers take over the legal matters.

The other one is what Abdu'l-Baha suggested:

If divorce taketh place, the spiritual love and affection between you should increase, and ye should become like a brother and sister.

This quotation reminds us to rise above our lower nature's temptations and choose the path of love.

Personal Reflections of Wildfire Close to My Home

The world is changing, and I try to adapt to these changes and move forward with my life. As human beings, we all relate to events differently, and the way we cope can impact our attitude and also affect those around us.

A recent wildfire near our town of Port Alberni highlighted this struggle for me. The danger was no doubt real and hard to ignore. One can lose everything that is precious, both materially and sentimentally. Once the news of the wildfire broke, some people began expressing their fears day and night about the fire's immense, destructive nature. Many, despite the lack of an evacuation alert, left the town out of fear. I had a hard time keeping calm due to the panic of others. But I chose to stay calm.

You see, my life has been filled with events that were beyond my control and left me feeling totally helpless. I left my home country of Iran, and then, after the revolution, I could not go back home. I was stranded in a foreign land without a passport or a job, as I was on a student visa, and no money could be sent from home. For seven years, I was a refugee in India, supported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. This life-saving support was welcome but barely covered food expenses. I had no money, no means of transportation, not even a radio to listen to music, and I had to survive with sicknesses and other unexpected events of life. My situation was made even more challenging by the fact that I was thousands of miles away from my loved ones at home.

On the positive side, my situation also presented an amazing opportunity to grow as a person and learn to be grateful in the face of adversity. The lessons learned changed my outlook on life forever. I was so helpless that I had no other way out but to rely on Him, my Creator, and my source of energy was the Holy Writings of all religions and in particular mine, the Baha'i Faith. Writings such as this helped to bring peace to my troubled mind:

"Whatever hath befallen you, hath been for the sake of God. This is the truth, and in this there is no doubt. You should, therefore, leave all your affairs in His Hands, place your trust in Him, and rely upon Him. He will assuredly not forsake you. In this, likewise, there is no doubt." ~Bahá'u'lláh

As in every situation and crisis, people react differently. Some panic and focus on the worst scenarios, and I cannot blame them for feeling and acting that way. Still, many people immediately started reaching out to others to offer help. I personally received a message stating that if we had to evacuate, we could stay in our friend's house in Nanaimo, along with another sweet message of concern for us and an offer of a ride if we needed to get out of town. The fire brought out the best in people.

My reliance rested on well-trained firefighters, as well as on a Higher Power that has saved me countless times from the depths of despair and helplessness.

I am deeply grateful to my Faith and my harsh yet valuable life experiences that have taught me not to panic, but to continue relying on God and His gift of prayer, the most powerful tool that can dispel fears in the most stressful times. Prayers have been my gift to navigate the stormy waters of life.

Changing the Community with Smiles and Acts of Kindness

As the world's situation worsens, with conflicts and wars raging, religions becoming tools of division, hatred and fear, misinformation eating at our humanity, it seems that humanity has lost its sense of right and wrong and is on a path of self-destruction.
Abdu'i-Baha points to the root cause of the problems facing humanity:

"Consider the heedlessness of the world, for notwithstanding the efforts and sufferings of the Prophets of God, the nations and peoples are still engaged in hostility and fighting. Notwithstanding the heavenly commandments to love one another, they are still shedding each other's blood. How heedless and ignorant are the people of the world! How gross the darkness which envelops them!" ~Abdu'l-Bahá

Fortunately, there are thousands of beautiful stories that can restore faith in humanity in people's hearts. For my part, I will share the story of a Baha'i in a small community who inspires me. Despite the overwhelming negativity in the world, humanity within him is alive, and the dream of the world becoming one family is his motivating force. My friend always smiles and is eager to hug and help people.

I wonder why he does these acts of kindness. I came across a quote from Abdu'l-Baha and realized the source of his inspiration.

"All the Manifestations of God came with the same purpose, and they have all sought to lead men into the paths of virtue. Yet we, their servants, still dispute among ourselves! Why is it thus? Why do we not love one another and live in unity? It is because we have shut our eyes to the underlying principle of all religions, that God is one, that He is the Father of us all, that we are all immersed in the ocean of His mercy and sheltered and protected by His loving care." ~Abdu'l-Bahá

One late night, he was talking to his friend who could not go to sleep due to physical discomfort. He remembered a lullaby he had heard when he was young, which always soothed his soul. Without any thinking or hesitation, he made a voicemail and sent it to him. Later, he realized how funny it was for an old man like himself to sing a lullaby to another old man in the late hours of the night. But true to his nature, he did all he could to help his friend get some sleep. He has told everyone that his phone is on 24/7, and if they need him, they can call him. He receives calls after midnight from his desperate and extremely sad friends who seek his advice to help solve their problems or just need someone to listen to them.

For many years, he has used the facilities at the local swimming pool, where he chats with the people and staff. He has made friends there whom he calls family, and every time he enters the sauna, he says, "Hello, my beautiful human family." He gives bracelets that he

and his wife make almost every day from inexpensive beads and uses them as a tool and an excuse to connect with total strangers.

One friend suffers from trauma. He respects my friend because he takes the time to talk to him, since others are scared of his sudden outbursts caused by the trauma. One day, once again, he met him in the pool. After exchanging pleasantries, my friend, realizing that he didn't have transportation, offered his wife's car to him, which they did not need. The gentleman politely refused to accept, but with tears in his eyes, he said the offer had deeply touched him. He then asked if he could hug my friend, who agreed wholeheartedly. I have no idea what the lifeguards and the rest of the people in the pool thought about seeing two half-naked grown-up men hugging in the pool and crying.

Knowing my friend, he lives for those moments, and like a person with an addiction, he looks for opportunities to give love and do whatever he can to demonstrate his love for humanity.

Abdu'l-Baha tells us:

"But some souls are weak; we must endeavor to strengthen them. Some are ignorant, uninformed of the bounties of God; we must strive to make them knowing. Some are ailing; we must seek to restore them to health. Some are immature as children; they must be trained and assisted to attain maturity. We nurse the sick in tenderness and the kindly spirit of love; we do not despise them because they are ill. Therefore, we must exercise extreme patience, sympathy and love toward all mankind, considering no soul as rejected. If we look upon a soul as rejected, we have disobeyed the teachings of God. God is loving to all. Shall we be unjust or unkind to anyone? Is this allowable in the sight of God? God provides for all. Is it befitting for us to prevent the flow of His merciful provisions for mankind? God has created all in His image and likeness. Shall we manifest hatred for His creatures and servants?" ~Abdu'l-Bahá

No matter how helpless the world may seem and how dark the future may appear, we must remember that humanity has endured many dark times in its journey from the Stone Age to the present, facing numerous challenges. Yet, it has managed to remain steadfast in its expression of love, humanity, and spiritual power, overcoming adversity.

My friend may not be the perfect example to follow. Still, he at least shows us that his little efforts have resulted in creating some positivity in the hearts and minds of those he meets, and this may give us hope that we can also, in our small way, contribute to restoring humanity and love for one another.

Thank God the Young Generations are not like me

I have surprised many people by saying that the young generations, whether millennials, Gen Z, and the rest, give me hope. Many people believe they are not making a meaningful contribution to the world's progress. When people hear me say, "thank God they are not like me," they are surprised. On my part, it was part of a protest and a way to express my frustration.

However, I need to provide some background. I've spent most of my life trying to help the young people in and outside the education system, and I am very passionate about it. When the pandemic occurred, numerous changes took place, and upon its conclusion, businesses were eager to restart, leading to a remarkable shift. Everybody thought that when it was over, the youth would be applying for jobs and wanting to start a career. And when the news came out that restaurants and businesses couldn't find staff, everyone was shocked. Some, in frustration, of course, said that the young generation is lazy. That they didn't want to work.

This really bothered me because I knew there must be more to it. I considered the idea, conducted some research, and wrote an article about it.

First, I thought about the generations that have come before, starting with the Silent Generation. Then came the Baby Boomers, which is my generation. Then came Generation X, followed by Millennials, also known as Generation Y. Next came Generation Z, and now we are in Generation Alpha.

Young people have always played a crucial role, bringing a fresh perspective. And we know from history that it all started with their young Manifestations. Most inventions and ideologies are contributed by the young, and yet humanity still hasn't learned to appreciate the qualities of youth.

In society, we tend to use the slogan that young people are our future. However, when it comes to practice, we often fail to listen to the young generation. And the excuse is that they are too young. We've probably all had the experience of our elders believing that we have nothing to contribute.

I believe that the coronavirus was a wake-up call to humanity. We all started re-evaluating our priorities, including the youth. They had taken so much for granted: going to school, getting a job, having a family, retiring, and travelling. And so life goes on. However, when the pandemic struck, many people suddenly discovered the value of a touch, a hug, or the company of others. Once we could go out again, they began to realize that maybe there was more to life than just money, and perhaps the idea of money had lost its charm a little when it was no longer possible to see loved ones. Maybe they questioned the purpose of work.

Alvin Toffler, in his book The Third Wave, explained that humanity has experienced three waves. The first wave was agriculture.

Life was very simple then. Basically, farmers worked for the lord or the king. Then came industrialization and mass production. Consumption increased, and the banking system emerged. This was the beginning of our whole economic system.

Institutions evolved, and universities emerged; monarchies gave way to democratic governments. Whereas in the agricultural era, humanity used resources as capital or simply lived off the interest of the capital, during industrialization, we began to deplete the capital, and we forgot that resources are not limitless.

For many centuries, we acted as if resources were limitless and everyone was happy to work, often in long hours, to provide for their families and eventually retire.

The young generation rejects this idea. They have seen older generations working and planning for retirement, only to have many of them become sick or die, so they question the point of it all. Perhaps they decide on a part-time job, or they take six months to go travelling and see the world. Or they choose to do some courses in spirituality to enrich their souls.

However, the young generation views the world of work with skepticism and perhaps feels that they would like to work, but not at the expense of their personal time. Maybe they want part-time jobs or to take six months to travel and see the world. Or perhaps they want to take courses in spirituality, morality, or something that enriches their souls.

Returning to Alvin Toffler's work, we are now in the wave of information. We have squandered our resources, and the next generation has to pay the price. The future is not as bright for them as it was for us. They don't know where they can get jobs. They don't know what is in store for them due to the ravages in our environment. Maybe they won't be able to hop on a plane as easily as we have been doing.

The youth are saying, "Wait a minute. I can't continue to do what the older generation has done. I don't want to hurt the environment. I want to protect it for my children."

They are aware of what is happening in the world because they are constantly exposed to it. They have the tools to explore, make decisions for themselves, be independent, and investigate. That is why I say, "Thank God the young generations are not like me."

However, I hope that when the new generation comes, the older generation will be more merciful and understanding towards them, and try to encourage and nurture them. For they, too, will be part of the information wave.

And that's hope; that's why I say I am happy, because the young generation is so independent, so tender-hearted, and so sensitive to the issues. When we were growing up, many social problems, such as justice and the environment, were not as important; we were too busy pursuing jobs and achieving material success, because that was the dream. The

“American dream” after the Second World War was to have all these things, and if you succeeded, you had everything.

However, the young generation now says they’re not so sure that having money and possessions will bring them fulfillment. There are other things they want to explore, and it’s good for them; they have all my support.

So, in the end, I would suggest to anyone to look at the potential of our young people, not their experience at this moment, because in six months, they could be more experienced than you and me; they have that much potential. Look at them as a resource, as a gem, see the gem in them, and see that potential and respect and love them. Hopefully, they will not make the mistakes that my generation made.