

## The Indispensibility of Consultation for Ordering Human Affairs<sup>1</sup>

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It is sometimes difficult for the world at large to understand why we Bahá'ís place so much emphasis on the subject of consultation, because at first glimpse, it may seem to be just another word for discussion, with which all people think they are very familiar. The same illusion can also affect Bahá'ís and prevent them from using consultation as it should be used. We must realize that consultation is not just a technique to be learned, but requires a development of the character of the individuals who are involved in it. This is a striking metaphor used by C.S. Lewis. He says that it may seem very difficult for an egg to change into a bird, but it would be still more difficult for it to learn to fly while remaining an egg!

If one considers what Bahá'u'lláh says about consultation, one can see that it is infinitely more far-reaching than just an up-to-date method of discussion. He says:

*No welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation.* (HDW p. 3)

This series of lectures and discussions is centered on the Universal House of Justice's statement "The Promise of World Peace", from which the title of this talk is a quotation. But in considering consultation I feel it will be helpful to proceed from the more familiar aspect to the less familiar ones. I proposed, therefore, to refer to three uses:

1. In Bahá'í Administration
2. In the individual life
3. In the non-Bahá'í world.

## In Bahá'í Administration

The use of consultation in Bahá'í administrative work is the one with which we are all most familiar, but I believe we think we are more familiar with true consultation than we really are. Let us read that well-known passage from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá on the requisites of true consultation. (You can find it in 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*, #45)

*The first condition is absolute love and harmony amongst the members of the assembly. They must be wholly free from estrangement and must manifest in themselves the Unity of God, for they are the waves of one sea, the drops of one river, the stars of one heaven, the rays of one sun, the trees of one orchard, the flowers of one garden. Should harmony of thought and absolute unity be nonexistent, that gathering shall be dispersed and that assembly be brought to naught. The second condition is that the members of the assembly should unitedly elect a chairman and lay down guidelines and by-laws for their meetings and discussions. The chairman should have charge of such rules and regulations and protect and enforce them; the other members should be submissive, and refrain from conversing on superfluous and extraneous matters. 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. The honoured members must with all freedom express their own thoughts, and it is in no wise permissible for one to belittle the thought of another, nay, he must with moderation set forth the truth, and should differences of opinion arise a majority of voices must prevail, and all must obey and submit to the majority.*

It is salutary, I think, to extract from that passage certain qualities that the individual consultants must evince:

- purity of motive
- radiance of spirit
- detachment from all save God
- attraction to His Divine Fragrance
- humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones
- patience and long-suffering in difficulties
- servitude to His exalted Threshold

‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that the members of an Assembly must consult in such a way that “*no occasion for ill-feeling or discord may arise*” and that this can be attained if:

- every member expresses his opinion and sets forth his argument with “absolute freedom” and
- does not allow himself to feel hurt if anyone opposes.

He also says that each member should express his views with the utmost:

- devotion
- courtesy
- dignity
- care and
- moderation
- In every matter the members must search out the truth and not insist on their own opinions,
- and it is forbidden to belittle the thought of another.

In every case where an Assembly or group of Bahá’ís is facing problems of disunity or unfruitful consultation one can point to one or more of the above requisites which are not being followed.

The essence of consultation is that it is a key to the reconciliation of opposites, and this is a characteristic of the Cause of God. In the words of the beloved Guardian:

Let us also bear in mind that the keynote of the Cause of God is not dictatorial authority but humble fellowship, nor arbitrary power, but the spirit of frank and loving consultation. Nothing short of the spirit of a true Bahá'í can hope to reconcile the principles of mercy and justice, of freedom and submission, of the sanctity of the right of the individual and of self-surrender, of vigilance, discretion and prudence on the one hand, and fellowship, candour, and courage on the other. (PBA, p. 43)

This passage reads like a catalogue of the problems that have beset human philosophy throughout the ages, and it gives us the key to answering those opponents of the Faith who accuse us of aiming to set-up a world-wide totalitarian state with the Universal House of Justice at its head. There are, of course, many other elements which should go into the answer to this challenge, but that is not our subject at the moment. It is, however, important for us to remember the degree to which the beloved Guardian stressed the function of consultation outside the ranks of Assembly members. For example:

Their function is not to dictate, but to consult, and consult not only among themselves, but as much as possible with the Friends whom they represent. (PBA, p. 43)

and the following very familiar passage:

They must, at all times, avoid the spirit of exclusiveness, the atmosphere of secrecy, free themselves from a domineering attitude, and banish all forms of prejudice and passion from their deliberations. They should, within the limits of wise discretion, take the Friends into their confidence, acquaint them with their plans, share with them their problems and anxieties, and seek their advice and counsel. (PBA, p. 44)

We should continually read and re-read these passages because sometimes one finds that an Assembly is reluctant to share its real problems with the friends for fear of losing face or undermining the believers' confidence in the Assembly. And yet we can see that it is the very Assemblies who follow the Guardian's advice which most earn the love and respect of their communities.

## In the Individual Life

The impact of consultation on the lives of individual Bahá'ís is manifold. It involves them intimately in the functioning of the Bahá'í Administrative Order, whether or not they are members of institutions. It is also, as Bahá'u'lláh makes absolutely clear, a method to which they should continually resort in the conduct of their private lives, consulting, as need be, with members of their families, with friends, with people for whose opinions they have regard. Together with study of the Writings, meditation and prayer it is the primary means for solving problems and for smoothing the interrelationships between people.

It is, however, more even than this. It has a direct effect on the development of the individual's soul. It is shot through and through with the development of individual characteristics which should suffuse one's whole life and behaviour. It is a school of personal development as, in a similar way, is the institution of marriage and of the family, in which consultation plays a special part.

Let us consider again the qualities which 'Abdu'l-Bahá calls for. Which one of these would we not apply in every aspect of our individual lives? If the members of Spiritual Assemblies, whom Bahá'u'lláh has referred to as the "Trustees of the Merciful" and even as the "Deputies of God" must evince these characteristics in the performance of their duties as "rulers" of mankind, how should they not characterise the daily life of every believer:

- purity of motive
- radiance of spirit

- detachment from all save God
- attractive to His Divine Fragrance
- humility and lowliness amongst His loved ones
- patience and long-suffering in difficulties
- servitude to His exalted Threshold
- absolute freedom in expressing one's opinion
- not feeling hurt if one's views are opposed
- devotion
- courtesy
- dignity
- care and moderation in expressing one's ideas
- refraining from belittling the views of others

There is an age-old controversy as to whether one needs a perfect society in order to breed perfect individuals or whether one must first train perfect individuals before one can have a perfect society. This is resolved in the Bahá'í Faith by the proposition that the fostering of the spiritual growth of individuals and that of society must go hand in hand and are mutually supportive processes. This is specially apparent in the area of consultation, since it promotes harmony and moderation.

It is a great problem in individual spiritual growth for the aspiring follower of the Way to distinguish between moderation and mediocrity. We are called to heights of perfection higher than we can comprehend, but are exhorted to moderation in all things. How can this be?

It is, I believe, but one aspect of the need for the individual to promote in himself the growth of all virtues and capacities, but in due balance one with another. When they get out of balance, a distortion of character is produced.

The problems caused by inadequacy are obvious to us all: carelessness in carrying out important work; lack of attention

to detail; laziness or excessive diffidence that allow golden opportunities to pass us by; lack of dignity in the presentation of the Faith; permitting a Bahá'í centre to fall into a state of disrepair and dirtiness which shames the Faith in the eyes of the public. Sometimes such problems arise because the believers concerned are just not conscious of the standards that they should uphold; they may have had in their upbringing no training in good taste, cleanliness or hard work. Consultation can draw out these aspects and help the community as a whole to overcome them. Consultation, in other words, can bring home to the individual the importance of excellence in all things and the need for continued improvement. To return to C.S. Lewis's egg metaphor; he points out that the whole purpose of an egg is for it to become a bird. It cannot just remain for ever a nice, decent, wholesome egg – it must either hatch, or go bad!

The problems caused by inordinately high standards are not easy to see. Sometimes the cause of disunity is simply the position of pride and lack of forbearance on the part of a believer whose skills and accomplishments have turned his head; if so, the situation may be a painful one but it is comparatively easy to detect and to cope with, for every Bahá'í knows that pride is a sin and forbearance a virtue.

We all know from experience, however, that it is sometimes a devoted, self-sacrificing pioneer, or one of the most active believers with the highest standards, who becomes the centre of disunity and disruption in a community, without any element of pride distorting his nature. The reason may simply be the ardour of the believer for nothing less than the best to be accomplished for the Cause of God. Having such high standards himself he finds it excruciatingly difficult to submit to consultative decisions which think are less than the best, or to leave the newer believers to fumblingly carrying out actions that he himself can execute with far greater despatch and efficiency.

I think one of the most salutary teachings of Bahá'u'lláh is that, for the creature, perfection is an unattainable goal. This, properly understood, should not cause us to despair, but should give us the enthralling prospect that, however far we develop our capacities, there is still greater progress ahead;

however great the joy we attain, greater joy is in store. There is no stagnation in the Bahá'í concept of heaven. It should also cause us to accept the imperfection of our own characters and understanding. We must recognize that what we may see as the perfect answer to a problem must, by definition, be imperfect, because it is we who see it. It can, at most, be a step on the way towards perfection and, if we could see the whole of the journey, we might see that it would be the wrong step at that time, even if correct in itself.

This recognition of permanent imperfection should have two results. It should prevent us from ever being satisfied with our progress. It should also free us from the crippling effects of that "perfectionism" which has been a blight on many puritanical societies. By this I don't mean a person's determination to do the very best he can in every task – which is admirable – but the extreme condition wherein a person comes to believe that he must perform every task with 100% perfection or be disgraced in his own eyes and the eyes of others. This is a far from uncommon disability in western society and produces the very opposite of what the individual aims at. It is, I think, a condition against which all Bahá'ís must be alert, because the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh hold before us such high standards. It is a largely subconscious condition and not at all easy to overcome.

Firstly, since it is absolutely impossible for any person to do everything perfectly all the time, or even most of the time, this compulsion is doomed to failure from the outset. Such a person, therefore, subconsciously knows this, avoids failure by refusing to undertake tasks or, if he does undertake them, often unconsciously programs himself to fail, so that he will have a good excuse for not succeeding. Remember that in this context "failure" is anything less than 100%, so that such a person may, in the eyes of his friends, be achieving all sorts of excellent work, but in his own eyes each one is a failure. Encouragement helps little, because it is just not believed. Since it is intolerable for a soul to accept that he is so much of a failure, this compulsion also causes him subconsciously to seek for reasons for his failures in the actions of other people, and breeds in him a tendency to criticize all around for everything they do. This, alas, produces the reaction that they then get back at him by



criticizing him unduly, which feeds his original fear that he is an utter failure and exacerbated the paralysis and depression that he feels.

Bahá'u'lláh's teachings enable us to strive for the highest goals, confident in His confirming help, but being uncrushed by our frequent fallings-short, because we know that it is in the nature of the creature to fall short. We can, I think, apply to the whole of our life the encouraging words that the beloved Guardian wrote for the members of Spiritual Assemblies:

*If we turn our gaze to the high qualifications of the members of Bahá'í Assemblies ... we are filled with feelings of unworthiness and dismay, and would feel truly disheartened but for the comforting thought that if we rise to play nobly our part every deficiency in our lives will be more than compensated by the all-conquering spirit of His grace and power. (BA, p. 88)*

This is where consultation comes in, not merely in helping us to make a balanced decision in a particular instance, but in daily demonstrating to a perceptive person the limitations of his or her own understanding, the fallibility of his or her own opinions. If approached in the proper spirit, consultation can be a liberating and educating process for the individual in his own life, apart altogether from being a guide to conduct.

If I may inject a personal note, I should say that one of the most enriching experiences I have enjoyed as a member of the Universal House of Justice has been in relation to those decisions of which, at the time I could see neither the reason nor the sense. I have known instances where, to my mind, a certain course of action seemed to be both obvious and essential, but the House of Justice has decided differently. In every instance, of course, it has become apparent in time how right the decision of the House of Justice was; and coming to see this as events unfold is a thrilling and illuminating process.

Of course, one can understand this happening in relation to a body which is divinely guided in its decisions, but, one may ask, can one be sure that the consultative decisions of spiritual Assemblies and committees will, likewise, produce true moderation and balanced wisdom, and not merely that

mediocrity which is the lowest common denominator of a collection of private opinions. You are no doubt aware of the crack that a camel is a horse designed by a committee.

There is in the Faith, of course, ample scope for private initiative and thought and action. It is a vital element not only in the life of the individual but in the administration of the community and must never be underestimated. In itself it could be the subject for a lecture, but today we are concerned not with individual action but with consultation and its indispensability. History is full of evidence of both the benefits and drawbacks of individual action; our experience with truly consultative action on a worldwide scale is only just beginning; it is a characteristic of the stage of human development which we have now reached. Bahá'u'lláh has brought mankind to a new leap forward in its evolution, and consultation is an integral part of this advance. It can help us sometimes, I think, if we look at such matters from the point of view and in the words of a non-Bahá'í philosopher who has perceived the same truth. I want to read to you two extracts from the writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. The first is from pages 243 to 244 of *The Phenomenon of Man*:

But why should there be unification in the world and what purpose does it serve?

To see the answer to this ultimate question, we have only to put side by side the two equations which have been gradually formulating themselves from the moment we began trying to situate the phenomenon of man in the world.

Evolution = Rise of consciousness

Rise of consciousness = Effect of union.

The general gathering together in which, by correlated actions of the without and the within of the earth, the totality of thinking units and thinking forces are engaged — the aggregation in a single block of a mankind whose fragments weld together and interpenetrate before our eyes in spite of ((indeed in proportion to) their efforts to separate — all this becomes intelligible from top to bottom as soon as we perceive the natural culmination of a cosmic process of organisation

which has never varied since those remote ages when our planet was young.

First the molecules of carbon compounds with their thousands of atoms symmetrically grouped; next the cell which, at the very smallest, contains thousands of molecules linked in a complicated system; then the metazoa in which the cell is no more than an almost infinitesimal element; and later the manifold attempts made by the metazoa to enter into symbiosis and raise themselves to a higher biological condition.

And now, as a germination of planetary dimensions, comes the thinking layer which to its full extent develops and intertwines its fibres, not to confuse and neutralise them but to reinforce them in the living unity of a single tissue.

Really I can see no coherent, and therefore scientific, way of grouping this immense succession of facts but as a gigantic psycho-biological operation, a sort of mega-synthesis, the 'super-arrangement' to which all the thinking elements of the earth find themselves today individually and collective subject.

You see what he is saying: that the theme of evolution is the rise of consciousness, and that this is produced as a result of ever more complex unions of elements. At the present stage in evolution it is we individual human beings who are the elements, and by our combination into one united mankind, we produce, the next level of evolved complexity which gives birth to a higher level of consciousness. He develops this point on page 251 of the same book:

We are faced with a harmonised collectivity of consciousness equivalent to a sort of super-consciousness. The idea is that of the earth not only becoming covered by myriads of grains of thought, but becoming enclosed in a single thinking envelope so as to form, functionally, no more than a single vast grain of thought on the sidereal scale, the plurality of individual reflections grouping themselves together and reinforcing one another in the act of a single unanimous reflection.

Does this not give us new insights into Bahá'u'lláh's tremendous statement: *"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."*

Far from being a process of obscuring understanding or reducing individual insights to a level of mediocrity, consultation makes manifest the "maturity of the gift of understanding." Through it the puny mind of each of us is linked with the minds of our fellows and, through the institutions of the Administrative Order with all Bahá'ís on earth. Should we wonder that it is through the Assemblies, the House of Justice, that Bahá'u'lláh has ordained the government of the world?

Consultation is a tremendously exciting process. It links us all to one-another and to God in one vast organism that enables us to rise above ourselves while, at the same time, developing our own individual natures to their fullest capacities.

## **In the non-Bahá'í World**

This brings us to the third use of consultation, in the non-Bahá'í world. Clearly, if it is a basic element of the next stage in human evolution it should be a fundamental tool to assist all human beings to resolve their problems. Even though, since they do not accept Bahá'u'lláh, non-Bahá'ís will lack certain vital elements of the spiritual attitudes which should characterize true consultation, they can well accept and practice most of its principles to great advantage. Indeed, by what other method are they to resolve their disagreements and find answers to the problems facing a disordered world?

There are many schemes for a perfect world around, and have been for centuries. There are many people nowadays who see essential goals that mankind must achieve. The stumbling block is what we are to do to attain them.

I recall in this connection a story that may be familiar to many of you, but it's rather striking here.

A man on a hiking holiday one day found himself lost in a country lane, and coming upon a countryman asked him how to get to Gloucester. The man thought for a while and then

said: "Well, you could go down this lane, turn left by the pub and then right – no, that wouldn't do it. I tell you, go across this field by the footpath through yon wood until you come to Baker's farm – no, that wouldn't help either. No, you have to go back the way you came to the main road and catch the next bus to Plumpington – no, that wouldn't help you either. I tell 'ee, if I wanted to get to Gloucester I wouldn't start from here!"

That's a bit like the problem of those who want world peace now. It would be so much easier if we didn't have to start from here!

This is where the twin principles of consultation and the independent investigation of truth show us the way out.

Let us inflict upon you one more quotation from Teilhard de Chardin. This time from pages 74-75 of *The Future of Man*:

Gloriously situated by life at this critical point in the evolution of Mankind, what ought we to do? We hold Earth's future in our hands. What shall we decide?

In my view, the road to be followed is clearly revealed by the teaching of all the past.

We can progress only by uniting: this, as we have seen, is the law of life. But unification, through coercion leads only to a superficial pseudo-unity. It may establish a mechanism, but it does not achieve any fundamental synthesis; and in consequence it engenders no growth of consciousness. It materializes, in short, instead of spiritualising. Only unification through unanimity is biologically valid. This alone can work the miracle of causing heightened personality to emerge from the forces of collectivity. It alone represents a genuine extension of the psychogenesis that gave us birth.

Therefore it is inwardly that we must come together, and in entire freedom.

But this brings us to the last question of all. To create this unanimity, we need the bond, as I said, the cement of a favouring influence. Where shall we look for it; how shall we

conceive of this principle of togetherness, this soul of the Earth?

Is it to be in the development of a common vision, that is to say, the establishment of a universally accepted body of knowledge, in which all intelligences will join in knowing the same facts interpreted the same way?

Or will it rather be in common action, in the determination of an Objective universally recognised as being so desirable that all activity will naturally converge towards it under the impulse of a common fear and a common ambition?

These two kinds of unanimity are undoubtedly real, and will, I believe, have their place in our future progress. But they need to be complemented by something else if they are not to remain precarious, insufficient, and incomplete. A common body of knowledge brings together nothing but the geometrical point of intelligences. A common aspiration, no matter how ardent, can only touch individuals indirectly and in an impersonal way that is depersonalising in itself.

It is not a tête-à-tête or corps-à-corps that we need; it is a heart-to-heart.

This being so, the more I consider the fundamental question of the future of the earth, the more it appears to me that the generative principle of its unification is finally to be sought, not in the sole contemplation of a single Truth or in the sole desire for a single Thing, but in the common attraction exercised by a single Being. For on the one hand, if the synthesis of the Spirit is to be brought about in its entirety (and this is the only possible definition of progress) it can only be done, in the last resort, through the meeting, centre to centre, of human units, such as can only be realised in a universal, mutual love. And on the other hand there is but one possible way in which human elements, innumerable diverse by nature, can love one another; it is by knowing themselves all to be centered upon a single 'super-centre' common to all, to which they can only attain, each at the extreme of himself, through their unity.

I am sure that everyone of us can immediately see that in the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh we have the God-given requirements of a common vision, a united course of action and, above all

that Being Who is the mainspring and central point of attraction of all.

In our collaboration with our fellow human beings it is above all in the fields of common action that we shall be able to impart to them the common vision and thence to lead them to the knowledge of the Being of Bahá'u'lláh.

We cannot just say that Communism, Racialism, Nationalism and all the other manmade ideologies should go away, any more than we can wish away the centuries-old structures raised by mankind on the bases of the ancient Revelations of God. But, in view of the great and terrible perils which can no longer be ignored, we shall find more and more people of all views and opinions who are willing to sit down and consult upon specific actions to be taken to overcome specific problems. As this process advances, as they learn through experience the benefits of consultation, as they see the Bahá'í teachings in operation, problem after problem will be overcome and mankind will have started on the road to the total restructuring of human society.

Consultation, therefore, is indispensable for the ordering of human affairs in three areas.

It is the most vital technique that Bahá'ís must learn for the efficient and Bahá'í-like running of Bahá'í communities, which together form the nucleus and pattern of the new World Order; it is one of the most potent means for the learning of those virtues which are essential for the spiritual development of individual human beings and their harmonious inter-relationship; and it is one of the most strikingly beneficial of the Bahá'í teachings to which we can introduce our non-Bahá'í friends and fellow-workers in every field. It is a tool that they can use to solve problems at every level, it is an avenue by which they can come to appreciate the truth of the Bahá'í way of life, and it is the only way by which minds raised in different traditions can find a common meeting-place.

As we began with a quotation from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, I would like to finish by reading three, for in these three short passages alone is inspiration for whole courses of study:

*The Great Being saith: The heaven of divine wisdom is illumined with the two luminaries of consultation and compassion. Take ye counsel together in all matters, inasmuch as consultation is the lamp of guidance which leadeth the way, and is the bestower of understanding.*

*Say: no man can attain his true station except through his justice. No power can exist except through unity. No welfare and no well-being can be attained except through consultation.*

*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.*

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A talk given by Ian Semple on 1985.12.20 and 1986.01.03 at Seminars held in the multipurpose room of the Seat of the Universal House of Justice)