Creating a Culture of Learning

Exported from Holy-Writings.com on 2026-06-18 — 1 clipping

Source: Bahá'í Library Online (bahai-library.com), curated by Jonah Winters.
Used by permission of the curator. Original citation: Sylvia Kaye, Creating a Culture of Learning, bahai-library.com.
â”€

Creating a Culture of Learning
2002 – Port Elizabeth

Sylvia Kaye

A New World Order

The teachings of Bahá'u'lláh represent a Divine plan designed to transform human character and existence and will bring into being a new World Order. Bahá'u'lláh proclaimed in many instances: "The world's equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order." 1 "By My Self! The day is approaching when We will have rolled up the world and all that is therein, and spread out a new order in its stead. He, verily, is powerful over all things."2 The changes involved can only be imagined and indeed may even be beyond present human comprehension, as they represent paradigm shifts in every attitude, practice and belief held to be sound and true by humankind at this present stage of development. The Universal House of Justice guides the Bahá'í community in envisaging the vast changes in store:

At the very core of the aims of the Faith are the establishment of justice and unity in the world, the removal of prejudice and enmity from among all people, the awakening of compassion and understanding in the hearts of all men and women, and the raising of all souls to a new level of spirituality and behaviour through the vitalising influence of divine Revelation.3

The transformations and changes needed to bring about the new World Order are revealed and written throughout the Bahá'í Writings and apply to every aspect of the way we think about things, act, and believe.

One example is presented in a recent message from the Bahá'í International Community, "Who is Writing the Future?"4:

The central spiritual issue facing all people, Bahá'u'lláh says, whatever their nation,
religion, or ethnic origin, is that of laying the foundations of a global society that can
reflect the oneness of human nature. The unification of the earth's inhabitants is
neither a remote utopian vision nor, ultimately, a matter of choice. It constitutes the
next, inescapable stage in the process of social evolution, a stage toward which all the
experience of past and present is impelling us. Until this issue is acknowledged and
addressed, none of the ills afflicting our planet will find solutions, because all the

1 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 136.
2 Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 313.
3 Universal House of Justice, letter dated 2 July 1996, in a compilation titled "Issues related

to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith."
4 Who is Writing the Future? Bahá'í International Community, Feb. 1999.
essential challenges of the age we have entered are global and universal, not particular or regional. (p.2)

Here, the concept referred to - that humanity is one, its unity inevitable - has far-
reaching implications, and challenges age-old practices and attitudes. Given the
inordinate importance many place upon cultural practices, it frequently leads to the
assumption that one's cultural ways are the best, and others are somehow inferior.
This further leads to comparisons and value judgments and becomes a source of
disunity; by implication a difficult transition from superiority to inclusiveness and
unity. Such value judgments apply to religious beliefs as well, in that followers
fervently believe that their own religion is the best and superior to others. This
attitude in its extreme is fanaticism; in the past and present, the cause of misery
and suffering for countless groups of people.

Creating a culture of learning is one way of aiding individuals and community to

adopt new attitudes and practices of a new world order.

Culture

Culture has been defined in many different ways, but an informal definition is simply that culture is “the way we do things”; or, sets of beliefs, values, attitudes and practices familiar to a group of people. Because people are taught culture right from birth, it continues to exert an influence throughout life. Much of culture is unconscious; it is often difficult to articulate one’s cultural attitudes. One of the views of gender, for example, is that it is a social or cultural construction. Biological influences add another dimension to the construction of a gendered identity. We “know” intuitively what is appropriately male or female, and may shy away from behaviour that fails to conform to the “norm.” It is usually difficult to articulate this knowledge; much of it is hidden and its teaching unspoken, something learned by the examples of people around us. The definition of appropriate gendered behaviour furthermore varies across ethnic divisions. But the influence of culture persists and is part of the way in which an individual defines him/herself.

Within religious communities, groups conform to cultural standards that are identifiable not only by their belief systems, but also the way the communities act. Can we identify a group as being “Christian”, “Moslem”; “Jewish”, even though within each of religious communities, the beliefs themselves are very varied? With Christianity, there are vast differences in beliefs making some values and practices inconsistent, but one may expect a Christian community to be, at least on one level, concerned with charity, salvation, forgiveness. One would further expect that teaching or preaching to the community or congregation often employs the method of parables and stories to teach its main doctrines. The strength of the teachings of Religions is such that they continue to exert a strong influence over centuries, even when distorted over a long span of time.

In the Bahá’í community, a new culture may be perceived to be evolving. Bahá’ís are

gradually adopting the principles of Bahá'u'lláh and are continually questioning and modifying their own cultural beliefs when in conflict with its teachings. Whilst not an easy process, nonetheless transformation will continue as the community grows in strength and in its ability to practice its Faith.

Some of the Bahá'í values that influence its culture may be said to be: prayer; acceptance of the absolute Divinity of Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings; unity; consultation; welcoming diversity; equity and justice; generosity; service; world vision; peace; obedience; individual initiative; humility; to name but a few. The power of faith in Bahá'u'lláh, the presence of a wealth of Writings, the unity of the Faith, the continued guidance from the time of its Founder, Bahá'u'lláh, to today and which will extend into the future; all are compelling forces at work that allow the Bahá'ís the opportunity to adopt a culture of change and a culture of transformation, making the evolution of culture towards something unlike any of the known cultures of the past.

Given the mix of cultural and ethnic groups in most Bahá'í communities, there are inevitably concerns about what, and whose, cultural values matter. The value of unity in diversity is overarching: it can override the desire to have one's own cultural ways of doing things dominate, allow for the varied expressions of all cultural groups to be valued. What is evolving may or may not be an as yet clearly defined Bahá'í culture, rather, a community that is more concerned with values and principle and less with insignificant practices. Sometimes an individual's culture may value a particular principle of the Faith more than another, for example, courtesy, or, a desire to include parents in the adult lives of the children. In these instances, a person would have less of an internal conflict to overcome, but all cultures have something which is contrary to the teachings of the Faith, so all have something to overcome, however different they may be for different cultures.

Learning

The understanding of learning continues to evolve. Educational research and theories especially from the latter part of the twentieth century have moved away from strictly behaviourist or cognitive definitions of learning, and have begun to understand through broader views. Learning, as it is currently being defined in expanding circles, is the process by which people construct understanding, taking into account their uniqueness: all the qualities, attributes, experiences, socio-cultural influences that make up the unique individual. We “construct” knowledge and meaning, we make sense out of the world, we look for meanings and connections. Learning then is an on-going process, we never stop learning and our understanding constantly changes. Constructivism and situated learning, examples of two current theories, allow for the consideration of collective (community) and individual (the soul) spirituality, concepts previously discounted in many learning theories.

Learning in this context is concerned with cognitive processes – the methodology utilized to learn; behavioural – what helps a person change behavioural patterns; and the interactions of culture, spirituality, biological, and life experiences on the individual’s learning. It describes human learning as the process by which people attempt to make sense of events; to connect them; to categorise and group them in an ever evolving view of the world and of the self.

One very powerful incentive or inhibitor to learning new concepts is rooted in emotional responses to events and ideas. Emotions may be visualised as being “thoughtless”, meaning that a feeling or emotion may have little to do with logic or critical thought, even though the root of the emotion can sometimes be identified upon reflection. People may react positively or negatively to others and to events and whilst gaining understanding into why one reacts a certain way is helpful in knowing one’s own self, at the moment of the response, it often overpowers reason.

Bringing oneself to account each day, knowing one's own self, is essential in grappling with the force exerted by emotions.

Understanding the role of emotions in learning and teaching is quite essential, as it acknowledges that emotions are part of the human condition. For example, passion, from one perspective a base attitude, can be transformed or manifested as a passion for learning, for accomplishing the goals of the Plan, or a passion for acquiring virtues. Love is an emotion expressed as the love of God or of humanity, or the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, or of learning. In this context, music, the arts, drama, stories, have the capability of drawing upon both emotions and spiritual responses.

It is useful to separate learning from teaching. We may teach, but the learning belongs to the learner. As educators, or as teachers of the Bahá'í Faith, as parents, this issue is demonstrated frequently. As an educator, one knows that the learners' understanding is uniquely individual. In one's efforts to teach the Bahá'í Faith, one is taught especially in the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá that it necessary to know the person one is speaking with in order to give a proper explanation. One may teach: the question is - what has the person learned? Parents know this concept well as they attempt to teach children. Often, a parent attempts to teach a child a lesson, however, the child learns quite another lesson that was completely unintended.

The Bahá'í Writings refer to this frequently, by explaining that the human heart is the home of God, we therefore, have no influence over what is in an individual's heart, his/her perceptions, what is a person's true aspirations, what motivates each individual, and the like. Learning belongs to the individual; teaching to the educator.

Learning, or the acquisition of knowledge, from a Bahá'í perspective, is unending, that meanings upon meanings are inherent in the world of nature and the spiritual world. Humanity is only beginning to grasp meanings in the world of science and in

the world of the mind, let alone relationships between the physical and spiritual worlds or other such abstract and illusive ideas. Understanding is unlimited. It is not surprising that each of us may understand concepts very differently and none may definitely claim they are right. Bahá'ís are advised not to cling to opinion; partially, no doubt, because we have no way of verifying the absolute truth of the view.

Culture of Learning

What is a culture of learning in the Bahá'í context? The Universal of Justice has recently introduced several ideas about the development of new cultural attitudes to be developed in the Bahá'í community. One is represented with the introduction of systematic planning. In the Ridván 2000, message, the House of Justice informed us that,

…The culture of the Bahá'í community experienced a change. This change is noticeable in the expanded capability, the methodical pattern of functioning and the consequent depth of confidence of the three constituent participants in the Plan – the individual, the institutions and the local community… In a word, they entered into a learning mode from which purposeful action was pursued. The chief propellant of this change was the system of training institutes established throughout the world…

… The members of the community came gradually to appreciate how systematisation would facilitate the processes of growth and development. This raising of consciousness was a huge step that led to an upgrading of teaching activities and a change in the culture of the community.5

The House of Justice presents another explanation in their letter of 9 January 2001 addressed to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, the culture of growth:

Training alone, of course, does not necessarily lead to an upsurge in teaching

activity.
In every avenue of service, the friends need sustained encouragement. Our expectation is that the Auxiliary Board members, together with their assistants, will give special thought to how individual initiative can be cultivated, particularly as it relates to teaching. When training and encouragement are effective, a culture of growth is nourished in which the believers see their duty to teach as a natural consequence of having accepted Bahá'u'lláh… In such a culture, teaching is the dominating passion of the lives of the believers. Fear of failure finds no place. Mutual support, commitment to learning, and appreciation of diversity of action are the prevailing norms (p. 3).

In a talk given by Dr. Peter Khan, he defines the new culture of growth "we want this culture where your natural expectation is that it is a growing community… this new culture should have a universal approach to learning. Thinking about things, taking action which gives experience, reflecting on this, and modifying one's action."

Dr. Khan further describes other elements of such a culture, for example, implicit in a culture of growth is the need for unity in diversity and harmony. "It further has to maintain a balance between individual initiative and obedience to collective action."

5 The Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2000.
6 Langenhain, Germany, 3 June 2001, Dr. Peter J. Khan, transcribed by an individual

believer.
A culture of learning as presented by the House of Justice can be created with changes in attitudes and practices, with the adoption of a vision that learning is at the heart of all that we do and all that we are.

The point is therefore that learning is an on-going process; the acquisition of new understanding and knowledge requires constant re-thinking with the aim of advancing our comprehension. Another attitude is in the acknowledgement that "the source of all learning is the knowledge of God."7, and the acceptance of such

a
concept creates an attitude of humility in the learner. Freedom from pride allows
one to reflect and to be open to new meanings and interpretations, to adopt new
methods and be willing to learn from all people and all experiences, however alien
they may at first seem.

Bahá'u'lláh teaches: "Indeed, man is noble, inasmuch as each one is a repository of
the sign of God. Nevertheless, to regard oneself as superior in knowledge, learning
or virtue, or to exalt oneself or seek preference is a grievous transgression."i

Another attitude is that learning comes from many sources. It is not solely in
reading and reflection, but in learning through spiritual inspiration, intuition,
through stories, the arts and drama, through music, through the powerful means of
example. 'Abdu'l-Bahá', designated as the Perfect Exemplar, taught in countless
instances by His example. It is a common practice amongst the Bahá'ís to both
recount stories in which 'Abdu'l-Bahá taught by example as well as to privately
wonder to oneself when confronted with difficulties, "What would 'Abdu'l-Bahá do?"

Summary

A culture of learning, thus, may be summarised as: one that allows for diversity of
expression; which understands the wide variety of ways in which people learn; and
attempts to adapt these to its own ways of doing things. It implies openness to new
ideas, new learning and a dynamic, organic growth not restricted by the past. By
acknowledging that the source of learning is in the knowledge of God, it can be kept
from fanaticism and dogma or the quest for extremes that may violate good sense or
principle, maintaining balance and moderation. It is a culture of excitement, of
challenge, of beauty and faith.

Since the inception of the Bahá'í Faith, new learning has always been an essential

element of being a follower of Bahá'u'lláh, as Bahá'ís are
continually exhorted to
study with the intent of gaining understanding of the world, to be active
participants
in the process of transformation. The evolution of a distinct new world order
requires profound refinement and change, sheltered in a culture of learning.

i Quoted in a letter from the Universal House of Justice, 19 October 1993, in a
compilation

titled "Issues related to the Study of the Bahá'í Faith."

7 Bahá'u'lláh, Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 170.)

— Creating a Culture of Learning (Used by permission of the curator)