

From our previous conversations, you know that the Bahá'í Faith is a world religion whose purpose is to unite all the races and peoples in one universal Cause and one common Faith. Bahá'ís are the followers of Bahá'u'lláh, Who they believe is the Promised One of all Ages. As you know, the traditions of almost every people include the promise of a future when peace and harmony will be established on earth and humankind will live in prosperity. We believe that the promised hour has come and that Bahá'u'lláh is the great Personage Whose Teachings will enable humanity to build a new world. In one of His Writings, Bahá'u'lláh says:

“That which the Lord hath ordained as the sovereign remedy and mightiest instrument for the healing of all the world is the union of all its peoples in one universal Cause, one common Faith.”

If it is all right with you, the first of Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings I will describe for you is about God and our relationship with Him. Bahá'u'lláh teaches us that God is unknowable in His Essence. This means that we should not make images of God in our mind, thinking of Him, for example, as a man. In general, that which has been created cannot understand its creator. For instance, a table cannot understand the nature of the carpenter who made it. The carpenter's existence is totally incomprehensible to the objects he makes.

God is the Creator of all things. He has made the heavens and earth, with its mountains and valleys, its deserts and seas, its rivers, its meadows and trees. God has created the animals and God has created the human being. The reason behind our creation, we are told by Bahá'u'lláh, is love. He says:

“O Son of Man! I loved thy creation, hence I created thee. Wherefore, do thou love Me, that I may name thy name and fill thy soul with the spirit of life.”

So although God's existence is far beyond our understanding, His love touches our lives and our beings ceaselessly. The way this love flows to us is through His Eternal Covenant. According to this Eternal Covenant, God never leaves us alone and without guidance. Whenever humanity moves away from Him and forgets His Teachings, a Manifestation of God appears and makes His Will and Purpose known to us.

The word “manifest” means to reveal, to bring forth something that was not known before. The Manifestations of God are those special Beings Who reveal to humanity the Word and the Will of God; thus when we listen to Them, we are responding to the Call of God.

There is an example from the physical world that helps us to understand the concept of “Manifestation” as taught by Bahá'u'lláh. In this world, the sun is the source of all warmth and light, without which life would not exist on the planet. Yet the sun itself does not descend to earth, and if we tried to approach it, we would be totally consumed.

But suppose we take a well-polished mirror and point it towards the sun. In it we will see the image of the sun, and the more perfectly polished the mirror, the more perfect the image will be. The Manifestations of God are like perfect Mirrors that reflect the Light of God in all its Splendor. And all these Mirrors reflect the same Light. While God is beyond our reach, these perfect Beings come to us from time to time, live among us, give us guidance, and fill us with the energy we need to progress, materially and spiritually.

You are fortunate to have been raised according to the Teachings sent by God to humanity some two thousand years ago through His Manifestation, Christ, Whose Station is that of the Son of God. Now you can receive the Teachings of a new Manifestation, Bahá'u'lláh, Whose title means the Glory of God. Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings, then, are in perfect harmony with the Teachings of Christ, but they address the condition of humanity today. If you think for a moment about the plight of humanity, I am sure you will agree that the time is right for another Manifestation of God to have appeared. Let me recite for you a passage from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh that speaks about the Day in which we live:

“This is the Day in which God’s most excellent favors have been poured out upon men, the Day in which His most mighty grace hath been infused into all created things. It is incumbent upon all the peoples of the world to reconcile their differences, and, with perfect unity and peace, abide beneath the shadow of the Tree of His care and loving-kindness.”

Before going on, perhaps I should stop here so that we can discuss any questions you have. What do you think about what I have said up to now?

The next of Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings that I would like to present to you is related to the aim of the Bahá'í Faith, which is to unify humanity. In the Bahá'í Teachings we are told that we are the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch. Although we differ from one another physically and emotionally, although we have different talents and capacities, we all spring from the same root; we all belong to the same human family.

Humanity can be likened to a vast garden in which grow side by side flowers of every form, color and perfume. The charm and beauty of the garden lie in this diversity. We should not allow the differences that exist among us—in our physical characteristics, our temperaments, our backgrounds, our thoughts and opinions—to give rise to conflict and strife. We should see the members of the human race as beautiful flowers growing in the garden of humanity and rejoice in belonging to this garden.

Although the oneness of humankind is an undeniable truth, the peoples of earth are so far from it that unifying them is no easy task. If you choose to join the Bahá'í community—and it would bring me so much happiness if you would do so—you will participate with the rest of us in our efforts to build and maintain unity. We are all striving to bring our thoughts and actions in line with our belief in the oneness of humankind. We are told that, when a thought of war enters our minds, we should immediately replace it with a thought of peace. When a feeling of hate begins to take shape in our hearts, we should immediately replace it with a feeling of love. We should do everything possible to overcome our prejudices. Prejudices of race, color, nationality, culture, religion, and sex, these are among the greatest obstacles to building a better world. So many passages in the Bahá'í writings teach us how to walk in the ways of unity and how to help others take the same path. There is a wonderful passage from one of the talks of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, of Whom I will speak later, which I have memorized. He says:

“Bahá'u'lláh has drawn the circle of unity, He has made a design for the uniting of all the peoples, and for the gathering of them all under the shelter of the tent of universal unity. This is the work of the Divine Bounty, and we must all strive with heart and soul until we have the reality of unity in our midst, and as we work, so will strength be given unto us.”

Like most people today, Emilia is quite attracted to the Bahá'í Teachings on unity. Enthused by the ideas she has heard, she enters into a brief but lively conversation with Anna about the harm that prejudices of every kind bring to humanity. Anna then resumes her presentation:

Bahá'u'lláh was born in 1817 in Tíhrán, the capital of Iran. From His early childhood, He showed signs of greatness. He received some instruction at home, but did not need to attend school, for He was endowed by God with innate knowledge. Bahá'u'lláh came from a noble family and when he was a young man, was offered a high position in the court of the King, but He refused it. He wished to dedicate His time to helping the oppressed, the sick and the poor, and to champion the cause of justice.

There are two aspects of Bahá'u'lláh's life which I would like to mention in particular. One is the suffering He endured. The other is the tremendous influence He had on the hearts and minds of people. These actually characterize the lives of all the Manifestations of God.

Bahá'u'lláh's sufferings began the moment He arose to proclaim the Cause of God. His life was one of exile, imprisonment and persecution. He was put in chains in a dark and dismal dungeon in Tíhrán. He was exiled four times from land to land, finally being sent to the Prison City of 'Akká in the Ottoman Empire. So intense were His sufferings there that He has referred to 'Akká as the "Most Great Prison". In one of His Tablets, we read:

“Remember My days during thy days, and My distress and banishment in this remote prison. And be thou so steadfast in My love that thy heart shall not waver, even if the swords of the enemies rain blows upon thee and all the heavens and the earth arise against thee.”

I always carry in my bag a small notebook in which I write my favorite passages from the Bahá'í writings. Let me read for you what Bahá'u'lláh has said about His sufferings:

“The Ancient Beauty hath consented to be bound with chains that mankind may be released from its bondage, and hath accepted to be made a prisoner within this most mighty Stronghold that the whole world may attain unto true liberty. He hath drained to its dregs the cup of sorrow, that all the peoples of the earth may attain unto abiding joy, and be filled with gladness. This is of the mercy of your Lord, the Compassionate, the Most Merciful. We have accepted to be abased, O believers in the Unity of God, that ye may be exalted, and have suffered manifold afflictions, that ye might prosper and flourish. He Who hath come to build anew the whole world, behold, how they that have joined partners with God have forced Him to dwell within the most desolate of cities!”

Every effort was made by two powerful courts—those of the King of Iran and the Ottoman Emperor—to oppose Bahá'u'lláh and His Teachings. But the Light of Truth is not easily extinguished. The very water that is poured on this fire to put out its flame turns into oil, and the fire burns with more intensity. Nothing could be done to stop Bahá'u'lláh's growing influence. The farther the authorities banished Him, the greater the number of people who were attracted to His Teachings and recognized His Power and Majesty. In spite of constant persecution, Bahá'u'lláh continued to reveal the Word of God for more than forty years and brought so much love and spiritual energy into this world that the final victory of His Cause is certain.

Bahá'u'lláh passed away in 1892. His Shrine, which we consider the Holiest Spot on earth, is located near the city of 'Akká. Here are some postcards I have of the entrance to the Shrine and the gardens surrounding it. You don't know how much I would like to go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I hope, someday, you will be able to do so as well.

Several years before Bahá'u'lláh proclaimed His Mission, God sent a special Messenger to announce His coming. This great Messenger took the title "The Báb" which means the gate. He was indeed a gate to the knowledge of God and to a new era in human existence. For six years He taught ceaselessly that the appearance of the new Manifestation of God was near and prepared the way for His coming. He told the people that they were witnessing the dawn of a new Age, the dawn of the Promised Day of God. He called upon them to purify their hearts from earthly vanities so that they could recognize Him Whom God would soon manifest. Thousands upon thousands of people accepted the Message of the Báb and began to follow His Teachings. But the government of Iran and the powerful clergy who ruled over the masses rose against Him. His followers were persecuted and large numbers were put to death. The Báb Himself at the age of 31 was martyred by a regiment of soldiers who, at the orders of the government, suspended Him in a public square and opened fire on Him. So that you can see how penetrating the Words of the Báb are I would like to recite to you two of His prayers:

"Is there any Remover of difficulties save God? Say: Praised be God! He is God! All are His servants, and all abide by His bidding!"

"Say: God sufficeth all things above all things, and nothing in the heavens or in the earth but God sufficeth. Verily, He is in Himself the Knower, the Sustainer, the Omnipotent."

Many Bahá'is know especially the first prayer by heart and say it either aloud or mentally in times of difficulties. If you want, we can pause a little and you can memorize it. It is really easy to do so.

After the memorization, Anna continues:

Following His martyrdom, the remains of the Báb were recovered by His followers and taken from place to place, always hidden from the enemies of the Faith. Finally they were transferred to Mount Carmel in the Holy Land. Here, I have some postcards that I would like to show you of His Shrine in Haifa and a few other Holy Places in that city and in 'Akká, which is across the bay. These twin cities are today the spiritual and administrative world center of the Bahá'í Faith—the spiritual center because it is here that the Shrines of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, as well as many other Holy Places, are located, and the administrative center because the Seat of the supreme governing body of the Faith, the Universal House of Justice, is also on Mount Carmel.

The idea most central to our lives as Bahá'is is that we have entered into a Covenant with Bahá'u'lláh. As you know, in all other religions, after the passing of the Manifestation, His followers had thousands of disputes among themselves and, as a result, split the religion into many sects. The cause of disunity was sometimes the desire for leadership of certain ambitious individuals. But, when differences of opinion arose between even sincere believers about what the Words of the Manifestation meant, one had been authorized by the Manifestation Himself to settle the disagreements, and this contributed to conflict and

dissension. Each set of interpretations led to the creation of a different sect.

Bahá'u'lláh has protected His Faith against such division by endowing it with a unique power, the power of the Covenant. Before His passing, He stated in the clearest terms, in writing, that after Him, all Bahá'ís should turn to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, His oldest Son, was thus named the sole Interpreter of His Words and the Center of His Covenant. He had been raised by Bahá'u'lláh Himself, had recognized His Station even as a child, and had shared the sufferings of His Father. He was a most precious gift given to humanity, the perfect Exemplar of all Baha'i Teachings.

'Abdu'l-Bahá lived on this earth for 77 years. He was born on the same night the Báb declared His Mission in 1844 and passed away in November 1921. His life was filled with affliction, but to everyone who entered His presence He brought the greatest joy and happiness. After the passing of His Father, the responsibility for the Baha'i community fell on His shoulders, and He labored day and night to spread the Faith throughout the East and the West. He wrote thousands of Tablets to individuals and groups everywhere and clarified the Teachings of His Father. His interpretations are now an essential part of the Writings of the Bahá'í Faith.

By focusing on 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the Center of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant, the Bahá'ís of the world remain united in their efforts to live a Bahá'í life and to create a new civilization. We remember that as part of our promise to Bahá'u'lláh, we are to love one another and, in 'Abdu'l-Bahá, we see the perfect example of one who loves. We remember that we must uphold justice, that we must be generous, that we must overlook the faults of others, and from the example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá we learn justice, generosity and forgiveness. More than anything else, by keeping our focus on 'Abdu'l-Bahá, we are always aware of our covenant with Bahá'u'lláh that we will not allow the unity of His followers to be broken and that, united as a worldwide community, we will labor until the oneness of humankind has been firmly established.

In His Will and Testament, 'Abdu'l-Bahá named His grandson the Guardian of the Faith and after His passing, Shoghi Effendi became the authorized interpreter of the Teachings. For 36 years, he continued the work of His Grandfather, clarifying the Words of the Manifestation and firmly establishing His Faith in all parts of the planet. Five and a half years after his passing, the Bahá'ís of the world elected the Universal House of Justice, as envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh and clearly described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Guardian. The Universal House of Justice is the supreme institution of the Faith to which all the Bahá'ís of the world now turn.

During her explanation of the Covenant of Bahá'u'lláh and the Station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Anna notices that Emilia is somewhat overwhelmed. She quickly weighs in her mind the two choices before her: she can take time and discuss the subject in much more depth, or continue with her presentation and make sure that in another conversation soon they would study the theme of the Covenant again. She decides on the second course of action and continues thus:

Many of the ideas I have explained on this last subject require a great deal of thought. If you agree, some other time we can discuss this matter in more depth. For that discussion, I will bring a few passages from Bahá'u'lláh's Book of the Covenant as well as the Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá so we can read them together. But let me go on and present to you a few other ideas you will want to know about the Baha'i Faith right from the beginning.

Emilia agrees and graciously states that she actually liked the explanation. That she has gotten a glimpse of the importance of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant, and that she looks forward to studying the subject soon. Anna, happy and relaxed, continues:

A most important aspect of every religion is the laws that the Manifestation brings to humanity in order to guide it in the right path. Some of these laws and commandments are eternal, others change as humanity progresses and evolves. In the Faith we are taught that we should not think of Baha'i laws as a series of do's and don'ts. Bahá'u'lláh tells us that His laws are "the lamps of My loving providence among My servants, and the keys of My mercy for My creatures." Nor should we obey these laws out of fear of punishment, for He clearly has stated in His Most Holy Book: "Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty."

These ideas will become clearer if I give you a few examples of Baha'i laws. In the physical world, human beings have to eat every day. This is a requirement of the human body; if we don't, we will get sick and quickly die. We can say, then, that eating daily is a law of physical existence which has to be obeyed. In the same way one of the commandments of Bahá'u'lláh is that we should pray every day. Like our body, our soul needs constant nourishment, and prayer provides the nourishment for our spiritual growth. There are many beautiful prayers revealed by the Báb, by Bahá'u'lláh and by 'Abdu'l-Bahá which we can say when we are alone or recite in meetings. Some of these prayers are special, and some are obligatory. One obligatory prayer is recited by Bahá'is every day sometime between noon and sunset. It says:

"I bear witness, O my God, that Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee. I testify, at this moment, to my powerlessness and to Thy might, to my poverty and to Thy wealth. There is none other God but Thee, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting."

It is a short and beautiful prayer and having seen how easy it is for you to memorize verses, I am sure you will know it by heart after repeating it a few times.

In another commandment, Bahá'u'lláh prohibits backbiting and calumny. This is important because, if you think about it, one of the greatest enemies of unity is backbiting. And unfortunately, it has become an established practice among most of humanity to talk about other people's faults in their absence. Everybody seems to be concerned with everybody else's shortcomings, which are made bigger and bigger as they are constantly mentioned. 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us to do just the opposite. If we see ten good qualities in someone and one fault, we should concentrate on the ten, and even if a person has ten faults and only one good quality we should focus on that one quality.

Emilia, who is listening with special interest to Anna's last comments, remembers some recent incidents at school in which backbiting resulted in many people being hurt. The two friends talk for some time about how gossip can destroy a friendship and then Anna searches in her notebook and reads the following:

"O Companion of My Throne! Near 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 forevermore.”

Then Anna continues:

Although this does not affect us much at our age, you should also know that Bahá'u'lláh prohibits the drinking of alcohol and, of course, substance abuse. Drinking alcohol is really one of the greatest social ills that exists today in the world. It is one of the most common causes of violence and the ruin of healthy family life. To tell you the truth, I have never understood why people would take something that interferes with their minds and makes them lose their ability to think clearly. Drinking makes people capable of acting in shameful ways, when we have actually been created noble. I know a beautiful quote from Bahá'u'lláh's Writings about nobility:

“O Son of Spirit! I created thee rich, why dost thou bring thyself down to poverty? Noble I made thee, wherewith dost thou abase thyself? Out of the essence of knowledge I gave thee being, why seekest thou enlightenment from anyone beside Me? Out of the clay of love I molded thee, how dost thou busy thyself with another? Turn thy sight unto thyself, that thou mayest find Me standing within thee, mighty, powerful and self-subsisting.”

Another commandment of Bahá'u'lláh, which is one of my favorites, is about the obligation of parents and society to educate children. Here, I have in my notebook a short passage from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Writings that explains this well:

“Therefore, the beloved of God and the maid-servants of the Merciful must train their children with life and heart and teach them in the school of virtue and perfection. They must not be lax in this matter; they must not be inefficient. Truly, if a babe did not live at all it were better than to let it grow ignorant, for that innocent babe, in later life, would become afflicted with innumerable defects, responsible to and questioned by God, reproached and rejected by the people. What a sin this would be and what an omission!

“The first duty of the beloved of God and the maid-servants of the Merciful is this: They must strive by all possible means to educate both sexes, male and female; girls like boys; there is no difference whatsoever between them. The ignorance of both is blameworthy, and negligence in both cases is reprobable. ‘Are they who know and they who do not know equal’”

You know, after I reflected on this great commandment, I decided to do something about it. So I hold a Bahá'í children's class with a friend once every week and we have seventeen students. I would love to invite you to come and help us with our class. Do you have time this Saturday afternoon?

I am sure you are aware that I am inviting you to join a religion and not just accept a collection of nice ideals. In fact, the Bahá'í Faith is a very organized religion whose aim is nothing less than the unification of the entire human race. It will be helpful for you to think of the work of the Bahá'ís as the building of a world civilization. The Universal House of Justice tells us that there are three participants in this work, each with a very important role. The first participant is the individual believer. It is the duty of this individual to remain firm in the Covenant, to strive daily to bring his or her life in line with Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings, and to serve humanity, always conscious of the fact that life does not end with death and that one's relation with God is eternal. After death, our souls

become free and continue to progress towards God for all eternity. Our lives here are very much like the life of an infant in the womb of the mother. For some nine months the child develops faculties—eyes, ears, hands and so on—to be used later in this world. In the same way, we are to develop here the spiritual faculties that we need to progress in the other worlds of God. Of course, we do not achieve our purpose by just thinking about it. We have to work, serve our fellow human beings, and share the knowledge we gain with others. The second participant is the community. Human beings were not created to exist alone. We live in communities and must work together to build the new civilization. The community closest to us is the local one which consists of the Bahá'ís of our village or town. It is in the local community where we learn to cooperate with one another, to grow together and become united. In addition to being members of the local community, we are also members of the national community and then the worldwide Bahá'í community which is constantly expanding and attracting people from every religious background, race, and nationality.

The institutions of the Faith, the Universal House of Justice tells us, represent the third participant in the building of the new civilization. This is a subject about which we will have to talk some more when we discuss the Covenant. For now, let me just mention that included in the commandments of Bahá'u'lláh are many related to the way society should be organized. In the past, the Manifestations of God have not said much about how their followers should organize themselves and people have had to discover how to do this by themselves. But, in the case of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh has brought His own Administrative Order, which means that He has told us what institutions we must create, how they should function, and how humanity should be governed.

We have already spoken about the supreme institution, which is the Universal House of Justice. In each country, Bahá'ís elect once a year the National Spiritual Assembly, and in each locality, the Local Spiritual Assembly. This is the institution that you will get to know the soonest. There are no priests or clergy in the Bahá'í Faith, and it is the Local Spiritual Assembly that guides the affairs of the community and watches over the well-being of the individual believers. A Local Spiritual Assembly consists of nine members elected in a prayerful atmosphere by secret ballot by all the adult believers in the community. Spiritual Assemblies are extremely important to Bahá'ís. Through them we learn how human affairs are to be administered and how a new order can be established in society, an order which is to be known as the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh.

We can imagine that the conversation between Anna and Emilia comes to a close here. Emilia is clearly eager to continue the discussion another day. Anna takes a small prayer book out of her bag and gives it to Emilia as a gift, suggesting they say a prayer together before they go their separate ways. Emilia opens the book and reads:

“O God! Refresh and gladden my spirit. Purify my heart. Illumine my powers. I lay all my affairs in Thy hand. Thou art my Guide and my Refuge. I will no longer be sorrowful and grieved; I will be a happy and joyful being. O God! I will no longer be full of anxiety, nor will I let trouble harass me. I will not dwell on the unpleasant things of life. O God! Thou art more friend to me than I am to myself. I dedicate myself to Thee, O Lord.”