THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

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To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

The nature of the flourishing communities that the Bahá'í world is striving to raise has profound implications for the family. It is within the family that the individual is born and nurtured, and within the family that individuals begin to learn how to live together with others. The family unit is the basic building block of community, and beyond, of the entire social order. Therefore, a society fashioned to meet the requirements of the age of the maturity of the human race requires both a mature conception of family and an ability to extend the insights derived from that conception to the relationships that shape the nation and the world. "A family is a nation in miniature", 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains. "The conditions surrounding the family surround the nation." Learning about a new pattern of family life is, therefore, an integral part of the effort to learn about the release of the society-building power of the Faith.

Historically, the family has taken different forms in response to the exigencies of the various stages of human social development. As society advanced, arrangements and definitions that may have been beneficial in a previous age reached their limits and were no longer suited to the next stage of human development. Expectations of parents suited to one period of history could hinder the development of their children's abilities in another. Likewise, certain strong allegiances within kinship groups that allowed them to flourish at one stage could in a later one become obstacles to unity within wider social arrangements. And certain gender roles that characterized an early stage of human development could eventually impede the advancement of women and of society at another. Thoughts and theories of past ages must be re-evaluated, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains. Humanity "must now become imbued with new virtues and powers, new moral standards, new capacities." For "the gifts and blessings of the period of youth, although timely and sufficient during the adolescence of mankind, are now incapable of meeting the requirements of its maturity." A challenge for Bahá'í communities worldwide, then, is to examine the present practices in their societies, weigh them in light of the Teachings, weed out any undesirable tendencies, and learn to establish new patterns of family life suited to the needs of a new age.

It is, of course, not possible at this relatively early stage to describe the nature of family arrangements that must ultimately appear in the fullness of the Dispensation. And different societies in different parts of the world, while recognizing the importance of strong families, face an array of forces that undermine the family in various ways. Nevertheless, the learning process that contributes to the movement towards a new pattern of life within and among families will accelerate as the Bahá'í world grows in capacity to apply certain essential insights from the Teachings.

Among the questions to be considered are the following: What are the characteristics of Bahá'í family life and how are they distinguished from the way family life is understood in society today? What is the distinctive nature of Bahá'í marriage and how does it foster family life? How do Bahá'í families contribute to the process of transformation in neighbourhoods and villages, and beyond? What are the current pitfalls and obstacles facing Bahá'í families that prevent them from achieving this aim? How does the framework for action of the current stage of the Divine Plan both strengthen family life and create opportunities for vibrant families to contribute to the process of community building?

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A new conception of family begins with a new conception of marriage. Bahá'u'lláh observes that marriage is not only "the key to the perpetuation of life for the peoples of the world", but "the inscrutable instrument for the fulfilment of their destiny."

For Bahá'ís, marriage is not only a physical bond, but a spiritual one as well, with implications for life in this world and the next. Bahá'í marriage, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, "is the commitment of the two parties one to the other, and their mutual attachment of mind and heart", so that they "may ever improve the spiritual life of each other," and so that they may "abide with each other in the closest companionship" and "be even as a single soul." In Bahá'í marriage, two souls learn how to assist one another so that both may achieve their twofold moral purpose—to develop their inherent God-given potentialities and to contribute to an ever-advancing civilization. The relationship the couple establishes beginning with their marriage ceremony will, throughout space and time, affect the forging of countless new relationships among other people that can constructively reshape lives and communities.

The Bahá'í perspective on marriage transcends dichotomies arising from permissive and regressive perspectives prevalent in society. In Bahá'í marriage, love, equality, intimacy, fidelity, sexual relations, childbearing, and childrearing are integrated and their interconnection strengthened, establishing a fortress for personal and social well-being. Permissive social practices undermine marriage and the family by disaggregating these features that are essential to human flourishing, while regressive practices overemphasize or distort one or another of these features to oppress family members. Adherence to the Teachings helps to resolve such problems. Much needs to be learned across diverse cultural settings throughout the world about the implications of all the features of Bahá'í marriage found in the Teachings. For example, central to the development of a new pattern of Bahá'í married life is the principle of the equality of women and men. As this principle is applied between the wife and husband within the marriage, the relationship is strengthened and thrives, and girls and boys will be raised with a new understanding of equality and its practical expression. The ramifications of this principle will thus gradually extend to future generations and contribute to the advancement of women until 'Abdu'l-Bahá's expectation that women will "participate fully and equally in the affairs of the world" is entirely realized.

Marriage creates family. And the sound relationships that are to bind members of a Bahá'í family are based on justice and reciprocity. Each member must receive the rights due; each must fulfil the responsibilities owed. "According to the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh the family, being a human unit, must be educated according to the rules of sanctity", 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains. "The integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered, and the rights of the individual members must not be transgressed." These sound relationships among family members require conscious cultivation.

In the Bahá'í family, the married couple are true partners; one is not subordinated to the other. Together they navigate life's challenges—whether spiritual, material, or social—through prayer, study, consultation, and reflection on action. Consider, for example, decisions pertaining to the education of children. The Bahá'í Writings acknowledge the mother as the first educator of the child and uphold her prerogatives in this regard. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá observes, "truly it is the mothers who determine the happiness, the future greatness, the courteous ways and learning and judgement, the understanding and the faith of their little ones." Yet, the father also bears responsibility for their education and upbringing, and cannot abdicate such a vital duty and leave it to the mother alone. And while, to support the mother in this role and ensure she is not disadvantaged by it, the father bears a corollary obligation to support the family financially, this does not mean roles are inflexibly fixed. Based on their understanding of the Teachings, the couple determine the best way to manage the family's affairs in response to different personal and social

circumstances. Each stage of married life will present corresponding challenges and opportunities a couple must strive to manage, cooperatively and effectively, while ensuring both the wife and husband's spiritual, intellectual, and professional progress.

In the supportive environment of the family, parents offer attentive guidance to their children to learn to live a meaningful and purposeful life of devotion, virtue, and service. To this end, through their example and the pattern of their daily lives and interactions, as well as countless conversations, parents lovingly nurture in their children a host of qualities, attitudes, habits and capabilities of increasing complexity, adapting their methods and approaches across every stage of child development, from infancy to maturity. From an early age children learn to turn to God and to love Him, to pray and recite the Word of God daily, to see themselves as noble souls striving to develop spiritual qualities, to prefer others before themselves, and to express these qualities in caring and cooperative relationships. As they progress, they learn to become accustomed to hardship, to practice self-discipline and accountability, to become forgetful of self, and to acquire knowledge of the arts and sciences. And as they increasingly step into the world on their own, they learn to develop an attitude of service, to diffuse and apply the divine teachings, to resolve differences and participate in consultation, to remain steadfast in the Covenant, to work for the betterment of the world, and to direct themselves to those things that lead to everlasting honour. The Bahá'í Writings offer parents a boundless source of insight with which to cultivate these and so many other vital attitudes, skills, and abilities, and the training institute provides essential support for the family by enhancing the understanding and capabilities of all its members. There may also be other resources available to assist in the material, social, and spiritual education of young people of which the family can take advantage—schools, community life, service projects, and so on. Yet the ultimate responsibility to ensure the proper and complete education of children resides with the parents.

As time goes by, the relationships among family members evolve and assume different forms. Carefully nurtured bonds of love and unity among siblings offer a lifetime of support and upliftment, and serve as a bulwark against the petty jealousies and divisions that can arise in the life of the family. Clearly, the rights and responsibilities of adult children are not the same as when they were young. Parents have to be sensitive to such changes as they prepare their children for maturity, attentively fostering autonomy and responsibility within the next generation as they grow up. Young people continue throughout their lifetime to respect and honour their parents, yet as they mature, they must take charge of their own lives and choices. In time, obligations change, and a child may increasingly be called upon by circumstances to extend assistance as the parents age.

The relationships of the nuclear family are embedded in ever-wider circles of relationships, beginning with the extended family. Grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins extend care and support that help to fulfil the purpose and responsibilities of the family. The characteristics of such familial relationships also extend to fellow Bahá'ís and other friends, who can assist a family in various ways. In the close social network forged in a vibrant community, elders offer deepening, wise counsel, and distinctive example. Others step in as spiritual aunts and uncles to share affection and concern for the progress of young people and provide support that reinforces the labours and lofty aspirations of parents. Youth act as older brothers and sisters who, in numerous ways, assist and inspire those younger than themselves. In this way, the sense of oneness, of love, care, trust, and solidarity that are initially cultivated in the family begin to be woven into the fabric of relationships in the community.

Attention to financial affairs is an essential aspect of a coherent and flourishing family life and of the involvement of the family in a burgeoning community. Consultation between the wife and husband, and with children as appropriate, will determine how this material concern is to be balanced with the many other features and obligations of family life. Wise and attentive stewardship of family finances must take into account many considerations, including how money

is earned, spent, and saved; how the education and well-being of the children are maintained; how much is to be allocated for the Funds of the Faith or to support community affairs; and how to discharge the obligation of Ḥuqúqu'lláh. In responding to these and other such questions, the family provides a space to learn in practice about generosity, responsibility, the difference between needs and wants, and the management of material means.

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Bahá'í family life opens an arena for dynamic interaction with the wider society. This interaction flourishes as family members strive to express in their lives the fundamental Bahá'í teachings. For example, the application of the principle of the equality of women and men, already mentioned, creates a distinctive relationship between wife and husband as well as among the children and the family as a whole, preparing family members to contribute to interactions in society that release the potential of all. Similarly, adherence to the principle of the oneness of humanity requires that children are provided with experiences that guard them from prejudice of all kinds and enhance their appreciation of diversity, which contributes to the ability to create relationships of unity and oneness in a divided world. In addition, fostering the capacity for the investigation of truth, for appreciation of the harmony of science and religion, for resolving differences of opinion and making decisions through consultation and cooperation rather than contention and contest empowers family members as effective protagonists in a process of social transformation. And developing qualities such as justice and compassion among family members prepares the children to establish sound and balanced relationships with others in society. Thus, the effort to learn to apply the Teachings within the family both generates within children a vision that transcends the family itself and raises consciousness about the conditions and needs of the peoples of the world.

Cultivating a new pattern of family life also counters the forces of disintegration that are an inseparable feature of an age in transition. These forces assailing society have particularly affected the family, sundering its ties, and taking a heavy toll on its members, especially on children. They can expose family members to some of the most destructive social pathologies: an absence of love and care, neglect of the things of the spirit, dehumanization, poverty, insecurity, and violence. Individuals are tempted to surrender to a life of material distractions or personal gratification, thereby becoming mere objects to be manipulated by those who seek to impose their designs on society. Contrasting ideologies and identities, incompatible with the ideals of the oneness of humanity and a peaceful world, vie for the allegiance of the masses and contend for superiority with one another. Some of these movements plant seeds of prejudice and fanaticism which ultimately yield estrangement, conflict, and contention among the peoples of the world. Others may seem to conform to some aspect of the Teachings, only to subtly lead the friends away from Bahá'u'lláh's straight path. The forces associated with the process of disintegration affect different populations in different ways. The family, and the community as a whole, will need to learn to examine existing circumstances, grasp the nature and impact of such forces, and, with full reliance on divine assistance, develop preventive and remedial measures in order to weather the tumultuous storms of a perilous age.

The family members' intimate association and their earnest desire to serve others opens a unique social space: a Bahá'í home. A vibrant Bahá'í home is an irreplaceable element in the process of community building at the grassroots. In the loving environs of the home, family members support one another in becoming capable and confident protagonists of the Divine Plan, and they welcome and assist others to play a part in transforming society. In a Bahá'í home, warm hospitality combines with spiritual quickening and intellectual progress. Through activities that every Bahá'í family can offer in its home, it can demonstrate a way of life that can be emulated by all those who seek to counteract the divisive forces that feed discontent, conflict, and self-

interest, and to weave the bonds of trust, cooperation, and constructive action upon which a healthy community depends. Indeed, in a range of clusters worldwide, groups of families are already opening their homes and working together to help to consolidate local activities and to greatly extend their reach and influence.

The concept of a coherent life of service is as relevant to the life of the family as it is to the life of an individual. The complex demands and opportunities the family faces continually evolve over time. Generally, advancing together on the path of service strengthens the family, and helps it address its many responsibilities across every stage of the life of its members. At certain times when a possibility for a more demanding service arises—whether for a member or for the family as a whole—the bonds of support within a dedicated Bahá'í family can make the wholehearted embrace of such a sacrificial endeavour possible. At such times it is vital to keep in mind the essential nature of sacrifice, which, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains, is to give up the concerns of the human condition for the things of God. Sacrifice makes possible greater service, but it is not the family itself that is to be sacrificed.

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As we survey the progress of the Nine Year Plan, we are filled with awe and deep appreciation for the devoted labours of the friends. Across diverse settings worldwide, we witness a range of sacrificial endeavours resulting from the cooperation of individuals, communities, and institutions, as the friends engage eager populations in a process of community building, initiate a range of projects for education and social betterment, carry the work of the Faith to new places, and harmonize the many commitments inherent in a coherent life of service. And despite the restraints of oppression or the upheavals of a disordered world, the friends persevere in their high aims. Countless souls worldwide are striving, within the limits of their circumstances and capabilities, to release the society-building power of the Faith in ever-greater measures. Toward these ends, the part played by Bahá'í families will be increasingly necessary and impactful in the years and decades ahead. All the friends have a vital contribution to make to strengthen this essential component of Bahá'í life.

"My home is the home of peace", 'Abdu'l-Bahá is reported to have said. "My home is the home of joy and delight. My home is the home of laughter and exultation. Whosoever enters through the portals of this home, must go out with gladsome heart. This is the home of light; whosoever enters here must become illumined." May your families and homes, dear friends, increasingly become a haven and pillar to sustain all humanity.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

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