

12/10/23 Faith, Community Building, and the Promise of World Peace

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The Blessed Beauty saith: “Ye are all the fruits of one tree, the leaves of one branch.” Thus hath He likened this world of being to a single tree, and all its peoples to the leaves thereof, and the blossoms and fruits. It is needful for the bough to blossom, and leaf and fruit to flourish, and upon the interconnection of all parts of the world-tree, dependeth the flourishing of leaf and blossom, and the sweetness of the fruit.

For this reason must all human beings powerfully sustain one another and seek for everlasting life; and for this reason must the lovers of God in this contingent world become the mercies and the blessings sent forth by that clement King of the seen and unseen realms. Let them purify their sight and behold all humankind as leaves and blossoms and fruits of the tree of being. Let them at all times concern themselves with doing a kindly thing for one of their fellows, offering to someone love, consideration, thoughtful help. Let them see no one as their enemy, or as wishing them ill, but think of all humankind as their friends; regarding the alien as an intimate, the stranger as a companion, staying free of prejudice, drawing no lines.

- **Intro**

- Good morning
- I’m honored to be here.
- My name is Karim Beers and I am a member of the Baha’i Community here in Ithaca.
- There is no clergy in the Baha’i Faith, and I speak as an individual, sharing some thoughts on how my faith inspires and shapes my work around justice and environmental sustainability
- Specifically I will share three teachings that are relevant to what I do and how, and offer some reflections that I hope are relevant to the work you all do towards the betterment of the world.

- **Oneness of Humanity**

- The first teaching relates to the Passage I read before about the tree, which speaks to the central teaching of the Baha’i Faith, the oneness of humanity.
- Baha’u’llah, the Founder of the Baha’i Faith, taught that we are part of a single human family. Like in a tree, Each leaf, twig, branch, the xylem and phloem in the trunk, the roots, does its part to contribute selflessly to the growth and flourishing of the whole. Each cell takes what it needs, and contributes what it can. Imagine if the leaves got haughty saying “we are the ones that do photosynthesis and make all the food this whole tree needs. What do the roots do? Stuck in the mud there, all dirty. Let’s cut ourselves off from them.” This of course is ridiculous. It is just as ridiculous to imagine a family in which each person is trying to get as much as possible for themselves—food, resources and comfort—and contribute the least. How happy will that family be?
- The oneness of humanity implies that our Reality is unity, and Reciprocity and cooperation should characterize our relationships. There can be no real conflict of human interest when looked at from this perspective.
- This foundational principle has so many implications for my work. Here’s one: a collaborative approach. *How can we put our minds together to address these ecological and social crises?* Is the question I am always asking with others. Territoriality, a desire for recognition or the limelight have no place. With this approach, we honestly search for who should and can do what piece, and how we can all support.

- The oneness of humankind provides both a goal and an approach, and indeed I believe is the foundational principle to help solve every human problem, from war, to reparations to climate change.
- Aren't selfishness and greed—our own, and our assumptions that others operate this way—the greatest obstacle to effective collective solutions?
- **Capacity Building & Building Community**
 - Believing in the oneness of humanity is one thing. Building a global civilization that reflects the truth that we are a single family living on this home planet is another. There is no simple instructions manual, and it can't be outsourced to some group of people to let them figure it out.
 - It is something that we need to learn to do and something that requires the participation of all humankind.
 - The second Bahai teaching, then, that I want to touch on is the role of building capacity of regular people, young and old, to contribute meaningfully to community building. This process of education is at the center of Baha'i community life around the world.
 - What are some of the capacities we need to be effective protagonists in fostering vibrant communities? There are many. Here are three that seem crucial to me:
 - First, The capacity to visit each other and share information about important issues, and have conversations that lead to new levels of understanding. We have already generated so much knowledge about living in harmony with each other and with our natural environment. For example, there are places around the world that are powered entirely by renewable energy, and there are studies that show how NYS can do this using existing technology. But we haven't figured out a way to share this knowledge, and generate additional insights, in a systematic, global way. This capacity to converse with diverse people—neighbors, co-workers, friends, family—requires qualities of love and kindness, an ability to express oneness clearly, and to listen deeply. We can learn all of these things.
 - A second is the capacity to consult with others, to analyze our local reality, make plans and undertake collective action. There is so much to do in our neighborhoods, schools, communities around ensuring every family has the necessary resources and support, around growing healthy food, increasing biodiversity, and we are fortunate to live in a historical moment where many of us—contrary to how we often feel—do have time to engage with others in such collective action. I'm sure Many of you are already deeply involved in such initiatives. Engaging in these cycles of reflection, consultation, planning and action requires qualities of fair-mindedness and selflessness, organizational skills, and persistence, as well as detachment from one's personal pet projects and priorities. These things too can be learned.
 - A third capacity is to engage young people in thinking about and discussing profound questions about the world we live in, and to develop the qualities of truthfulness, justice, compassion, and loving-kindness that constitute the foundation of healthy community life. You don't have to be an expert to work with young people. We can learn these things. Even I have done this! I have been fortunate to be able to teach children's class and lead a youth group with my children and their friends over the last decade. And of course, not only are the young people learning about qualities of generosity, what it means to be a good friend, and carrying out acts of service, but we teachers perhaps get even more out of it!
 - I have mentioned three capacities that are needed for building healthy communities—visiting others and sharing meaningful information; engaging with others in a process of reflection,

planning and action; and educating and empowering younger generations . There are many more.

- But just from this short list you can see that as we develop our inner, spiritual qualities of the soul, such as love and compassion, we are better able to contribute meaningfully to our communities. And the more we strive to transform our societies the more opportunities we will have to strengthen our inner character. Individual and social transformation are thus simultaneous and mutually reinforcing. Baha'is refer to these two aspects as a twofold moral purpose.
- Building capacity in others for personal and collective transformation is the central theme in my work. I mentioned being a children's class teacher and youth group leader. In my paid work in the clean energy field, I helped create a volunteer program called Energy Navigators. The idea is that It's not enough for us to learn about climate change and then just insulate our home, ride our bike, and compost. We must be doing these things, reflecting on our decisions and choices, and in cooperation with others, support others and our communities to do the same. The Energy Navigators program provides training and support for volunteers to engage with their communities around clean energy issues.
- Building capacity for service is related to the reality of our oneness as a human species. Not only is there space for everyone to contribute. Everyone's contribution is vital. Going back to the analogy of the tree. A healthy tree is one in which each part contributes actively to the well-being of the whole. What happens if only some cells are healthy and contributing? Your efforts and the efforts of everyone you know and meet are essential.

- **Promise of World Peace**

- Now It can be easy to get discouraged when you are working on eliminating racial prejudice, the extremes of wealth and poverty, reversing climate change. Do you feel this way sometimes?
- And yet you persist. For me, this comes from Faith. Faith in Divine Assistance; Faith in the Promise of World Peace, which is the third and final teaching I want to mention.
- The Baha'i writings state that World peace is not only possible, but Inevitable, and represents the next stage in our collective evolution. Baha'u'llah has not only spoken about the reality of oneness as a desirable thing, but has said that this is God's purpose and will, and no force is capable of stopping humanity from achieving it.
- This does not mean it will be easy. The reconstruction and demilitarization of the world is not a simple, automatic process. But a generational endeavor that requires patience, constancy, and hope.
- I recently went with a group of youth and a few other adults to climb Mt Marcy, the tallest of mountains in NYS, as part of a coming-of-age trip for this group of young people I've been working with for many years. It was going to be 15 mile round-trip from our campsite, and while we had done practice hikes before, this was by far longer and more challenging. After school on a Friday, we drove up to the Adirondacks, arriving close to midnight to set up tents and sleep. We woke up at 6am to get an early start. It took us a while to get ready, and when we reached the trail head a warden stopped us. She looked us up and down. Seeing our inexperience, our sneakers, she told us basically that she didn't think we should climb the mountain. We were discouraged. We thought about doing a shorter climb.
- I'll pause my story to talk about another mountain we must climb: ending hunger, poverty, establishing just institutions that preserve the honor and dignity of all the people they serve. Reversing decades of climate change and biodiversity loss and pollution. This is a BIG mountain. And much of the messaging is about how impossible it is to get there. How the mountain is getting bigger and steeper and more treacherous every day. How unless some powerful people

or rich countries do x, y, and z, we stand no chance, and the most likely future is bleak. It's hard to not feel discouraged, and think about doing something smaller, or just watching the next episode on Netflix.

- Not to negate the real challenges we face or to be Pollyannaish about the consequences of inaction. These are real. But it is also true that humans are incredibly resourceful. We have learned so much, and we continue to learn. And we have God's support and promise.
- Back to Mt Marcy. The youth all did make it up and down the mountain, with the last of us arriving at camp exhausted after dark. (Was I thankful I went with two adults who actually knew what they were doing!) The youth were all so proud of their accomplishment, and glad they had not taken an easier route.
- The point in sharing this story about the climb is that how we think about and describe our work is important. We wouldn't have made it if we had given in to fear. Faith in the power of good, in the promise of God, is necessary to give us strength to dedicate ourselves to the betterment of the world.
- Now remember it is also true what scientists say about the consequences of inaction. So a healthy dose of fear is appropriate. But we have to have these in the right proportion.

- **Conclusion**

- I have shared these three teachings about the oneness of humankind, the importance of capacity building and universal participation, and the promise of world peace, since they have been so helpful in guiding and inspiring me, in the hope that you may find something of use for you as well in your work to build diverse, vibrant communities.
- I am eager to hear your insights into what has been helpful for you. The truth is you are already doing so much of this. You are collaborating with others. You are seeking out diverse friendships, diversity in race, nationality, and religion, and also diversity in thought, political background. You are seeking to learn from them, and to share insights about what you have gained. The UU church is an example of the forces of collaboration and connection, of building bridges. So I'm sure you have so much to offer.
- This is important work! The visits to others in their homes, the gatherings for prayer, the education of children and youth, the study groups, the service projects, your daily efforts to translate God's teachings into reality, and your collective efforts to improve some aspect of community life—all this counts.
- Let me close with two short passages from the Writings of Baha'u'llah: "The betterment of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds, through commendable and seemly conduct."
- "Beseech ye the one true God to grant that ye may taste the savor of such deeds as are performed in His path, and partake of the sweetness of such humility and submissiveness as are shown for His sake. Forget your own selves, and turn your eyes towards your neighbor. Bend your energies to whatever may foster the education of men. Nothing is, or can ever be, hidden from God. If ye follow in His way, His incalculable and imperishable blessings will be showered upon you."
- Thank you.