

Portals to Growth: Creating Capacity for Service
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Notes from a Series of Talks by Dr. Farzam Arbab

Day 2

The Training Institute and Its Main Sequence of Courses

Yesterday we talked about education and capacity building. In this context, we reminded ourselves that the Bahá'í world community is engaged in a historical enterprise of unimaginable magnitude, an enterprise that seeks a most profound transformation at the level of both the individual and society. The Divine Plan, which governs our efforts to promote this dual transformation, proceeds in successive stages, and at any given moment, our collective educational endeavors as a Bahá'í community need to respond to the exigencies of the Plan at that moment. The concept of the training institute could be understood in this context: as an instrument to set in motion a certain educational process at this particular stage of the unfoldment of the Divine Plan. Today, I am to share with you a few ideas about the nature and purpose of the training institute and its main sequence of courses, hoping that you will find these remarks useful in your reflections.

We mentioned yesterday that the first act of systemization called for by the Four Year Plan was in relation to the development of human resources. The 26 December 1995 message of the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, made the following statement:

The development of human resources on a large scale requires that the establishment of institutes be viewed in a new light. In many regions, it has become imperative to create institutes as organizational structures dedicated to systematic training. The purpose of such training is to endow ever-growing contingents of believers with the spiritual insights, the knowledge, and the skills needed to carry out the many tasks of accelerated expansion and consolidation, including the teaching and deepening of a large number of people—adults, youth and children. This purpose can best be achieved through well-organized, formal programs consisting of courses that follow appropriately designed curricula.

Many questions have arisen about the nature of the institute process and its relationship to other activities, as the friends have striven to implement this guidance of the Universal House of Justice. There are those who have wondered, for example, whether participation in institute courses is mandatory or whether deepening classes are no longer necessary. Some have asked whether firesides are being replaced by study circles, while others have expressed unease at what they see as a danger of uniformity. All such questions and concerns are laid to rest when we remember what a training institute is: It is an agency for the development of human resources dedicated to the advancement of the process of entry by troops. In this sense, it is to set in motion an educational process that is intended to respond to a very specific exigency of the Divine Plan. It does not compete with or act as a substitute for the other structures that have been built over the decades.

It is important to note that the Four Year Plan was actually couched in terms of the building of institutional capacity in each national community for training large numbers. Since, as I mentioned yesterday, the Bahá'í world's previous experience with large-scale expansion had not been sustained, we can safely assume that this capacity was not well developed in any country, at least not certainly to the extent that this new stage of systematization demanded. Counsellors and National Assemblies, then, were obliged to embark on a period of accelerated learning to discover the appropriate materials, methods and modes of delivery of the educational process being established. Many alternatives were tried throughout the world, but experiences did converge, in ways that could not have been anticipated, and after a few years a system had evolved around the materials developed by the Ruhi Institute in Colombia, and were being employed by national community after national community.

The fundamental ideas upon which the system is built—the sequence of books, the trunk and the branches, tutors, study circles, tutor reflection meetings, institute campaigns—with all of these you are familiar. Your own country adopted the system towards the end of 1997 and has played a part in the worldwide development of the concept of a training institute as a most crucial agency of the Faith. That the initial set of materials around which the system took shape emerged from a country somewhat more advanced than its sister communities in the systematization required by the Four Year Plan seems reasonable. But, in the final analysis, the specific country of origin is of little consequence. What we are doing today, then, is examining the main sequence of the courses of your training institutes and your experience with it. Tomorrow, we will look at the question of branch courses and the development of curricula for them.

Before entering into specifics about the main sequence, however, I would like to comment briefly on what characteristics we might expect the entire curriculum to have—the trunk and the branches—as it gradually develops, if it is to meet the requirements of capacity building as we discussed yesterday.

A process of capacity building in the protagonists of our global plans will obviously involve imparting knowledge. This has to be done, of course, in such a way that the participants are fully engaged in the process, ensuring that they gain a sense of ownership of their learning. They cannot be treated as passive recipients of someone else's knowledge. In fact, every effort has to be made to help them to engage in the generation, application and diffusion of knowledge, each according to his or her own possibilities. To achieve this, the educational process must connect the participants to two sources of knowledge, the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, on the one hand, and the Bahá'í experience in applying the teachings and principles of the Faith, on the other. It needs to involve the friends in the creation of this experience and in its diffusion.

Knowledge needs to be treated in this educational process in such a way that it enables the participants to avoid bigotry and fanaticism. Knowledge should not lead to rigidity of thought, narrow-mindedness, and intolerance. But neither should it result in that extreme form of liberalism that tends to deny the very existence of limits and bounds. One of the

precepts of the Faith is that religious truth is relative, but this is not the kind of relativism that is being propagated in the world today. It is one thing to say that human understanding is limited and therefore evolves, and another to deny the existence of absolutes, presenting, in a most contradictory way, as the only absolute the equal validity of the opinions, the desires, and the wants of the individual as shaped by culture.

Our communities, of course, are protected against such extremes. But if this brand of relativism is allowed to influence us, the result is paralysis, as the will of the individual is granted supreme importance and the community is pulled in a thousand directions. To promote the process of entry by troops and to participate in it effectively requires, as the House of Justice puts it, “clarity and single-mindedness”. Progress is not to be made by “spasmodic, uncoordinated exertions”.

Further, knowledge must lead to certitude. “By faith is meant, first, conscious knowledge and second, the practice of good deeds” are the words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Entry by troops involves walking the path of learning with humility and openness, yet with certitude.

An educational process aimed at building capacity to contribute towards the process of entry by troops has to be concerned, of course, with more than the cognitive: the workings of the human brain. The reality of the human being is the soul, and the soul has no material existence. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has explained that mental faculties are “inherent properties of the soul, even as the radiation of light is the essential property of the sun.” “It is through the power of the soul,” He states, “that the mind comprehendeth, imagineth and exerteth its influence, whilst the soul is a power that is free. The mind comprehendeth the abstract by the aid of the concrete, but the soul hath limitless manifestations of its own. The mind is circumscribed, the soul limitless. It is by the aid of such senses as those of sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch, that the mind comprehendeth, whereas, the soul is free from all agencies.”

Working for the advancement of entry by troops surely requires more than an understanding of the abstract reached through the concrete. It is in need of such powers as inner sight and inner hearing, with the aid of which, for example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá assures us we can see the immortality of the soul as clearly as we see the sun.

One of the greatest powers seeded in the depths of the human soul is attraction to beauty. Capacity building needs to awaken, nurture and direct it. At one level, attraction to beauty manifests itself in an individual’s impulse to fashion beauty through the visual arts, music, and crafts, and the pleasure he or she derives from beholding the fruits of these creative endeavors. It motivates search for order, meaning and balance, and creates drive for excellence. At another level it makes obedience a most joyous act, a response to Bahá’u’lláh’s exhortation: “Observe My commandments for the love of My beauty.” How else is the ardent lover of Bahá’u’lláh to understand the mystery of sacrifice, to persist, and to overcome the formidable difficulties that inevitably arise in the path of service to His Cause?

One of the ills that has affected most of the educational systems of the world today is the identification of knowledge with information. The development of the various faculties of the soul, as I have mentioned here, requires an educational process that enables the individual to reach the shores of true understanding. There is a longing in every human heart for meaning; there is a natural craving for knowledge of the outer and inner realities of creation. Every soul yearns to understand the purpose for its existence. Clearly, the process of capacity building in which we are engaged needs to foster the understanding of such essential metaphysical themes. But, at a more practical level, being a protagonist in the work of entry by troops requires an ever-deepening understanding of such subjects as the nature of the historical moment in which we live, the relationship between personal growth and organic change in institutional structures, and the operation of forces that transform people and society—to mention only a few. In this context, the nature of receptivity to the call of Bahá'u'lláh, it seems to me, is an object of understanding of particular significance. So, too, is the related subject of oppression as defined in the Book of Certitude: “What ‘oppression’ is more grievous than that a soul seeking the truth, and wishing to attain unto the knowledge of God, should know not where to go for it and from whom to seek it?”

Bahá'u'lláh has told us that the gift of understanding, which is first and foremost among God's favors, gives us the power to discern the truth in all things. The ability to distinguish truth from falsehood is surely indispensable for one who wishes to act on a society in which the distinction between the two has become blurred. Without this ability it would be difficult to attain the “rectitude of conduct” that Shoghi Effendi includes among the “chief propelling forces” that can “most effectively accelerate” the march of our “institutions, plans, and enterprises”.

Shattering the idols of superstition is another demand made on our educational endeavors by the human condition today. “People for the most part delight in superstitions,” Bahá'u'lláh warns us. “They regard a single drop of the sea of delusion as preferable to an ocean of certitude. By holding fast unto names they deprive themselves of the inner reality and by clinging to vain imaginings they are kept back from the Dayspring of heavenly signs. God grant you may be graciously aided under all conditions to shatter the idols of superstition and to tear away the veils of the imaginations of men.”

Thus, the fostering of true understanding involves burning away the “veils” of the imaginations of men. The implications for the work of entry by troops are great. To dispel the mists of doubts and misgivings in a seeker's heart, the friends and the institutions must learn how to remove obstacles that keep people from entering the City of Certitude. The Guardian has identified a number of such obstacles: “gross materialism,” “the attachment to worldly things that enshrouds the souls of men; the fears and anxieties that distract their minds; the pleasure and dissipations that fill their time, the prejudices and animosities that darken their outlook, the apathy and lethargy that paralyze their spiritual faculties”. Further, he has reminded us that our ability to remove these obstacles will depend on the degree to which we ourselves are cleansed of “these impurities,” liberated from “these petty preoccupations and gnawing anxieties,” freed

from “these prejudices and antagonisms”, “emptied of self” and “filled by the healing and the sustaining power of God”.

Freedom is yet another essential concern of capacity building in the context we are considering here. The freedom to which we are referring, of course, is not the same as liberty to follow the dictates of a lower nature. Quite the opposite. “And among the teachings of His Holiness Bahá’u’lláh is man’s freedom,” says ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “that through the Ideal Power he should be emancipated and free from the captivity of the world of nature.” The path that leads to this “liberation”, of course, is not the path of personal salvation but that of service to the Cause of unity and well-being of the human race.

This suggests that the process of capacity building in which we are involved should place God—and, as a corollary, service to His loved ones—at its center. While this may seem like an obvious statement, it is not that straightforward. In helping individuals to gain knowledge of their own selves and to develop their talents in service to the Cause and humanity, one can inadvertently end up building the ego and, far from liberating souls, further enchain them in the fetters of self. A sense of superiority, desire for recognition, ambition and pride can then take hold and consume the soul. To build capacity in a way that quiets the ego is a formidable challenge.

The various characteristics of capacity building I have mentioned up to now point to another extremely important one: Capacity building must necessarily be concerned with raising consciousness. All created things do not exist at the same level of consciousness. Compare a rock with a bird, and a bird with a human being. The differences between the state of consciousness of one human being and another can be as vast. A heightened awareness of potentialities and responsibilities, of the need to be an active force rather than an spectator of events, awareness of the nature of each historical moment, of the many processes that together create the forward march of the Cause at that moment, of the forces that act on society, and of the spiritual forces that are at one’s disposal—these are some of the matters on which consciousness raising in our case needs to focus. Just to know about something is not the same as being acutely aware of it and allowing it to influence one’s thoughts and actions consistently.

An educational process with the explicit aim of raising consciousness, however, has to take into account an important fact. Our environment instills in many of us a fear of moving to new levels of awareness. Living one’s own life quietly, doing, of course, no harm to anyone, offers us a degree of comfort that we learn to cherish. Becoming aware of wider responsibilities, we may fear, will bring pain and demand for sacrifice. But such fear is unfounded. At higher levels of consciousness sacrifice is a harbinger of joy, not a source of pain.

Every educational endeavor is, without doubt, concerned with motivation. But beyond the question of motivation, we are engaged in an educational process that seeks to create ardent desire. “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," the Universal House of Justice has written. "So enkindled do their hearts become with the fire of the love of God that whoever approaches them feels its warmth... In such a culture, teaching is the dominating passion of the lives of the believers."

The human heart was created to harbor desire, to have passion. The question is: What kind of passion? What kind of desire? Spiritual development enables us to control our lower passions, our worldly desires. The final result, however, is not a dead heart but one in which, in the words of Bahá'u'lláh, "the lamp of search, of earnest striving, of longing desire, of passionate devotion, of fervid love, of rapture, and ecstasy" has been kindled. To be a protagonist of the Five Year Plan, for example, calls for a passionate desire to see the process of entry by troops advance in one's cluster.

Clearly desire is one of the forces that comes into play when we are to translate thought into action. Yet, by itself, it is not sufficient. Our educational process must be as concerned with strengthening the force of will as it is with desire, and seek to create channels through which it can express itself. Some tend to believe that, if one understands a thing well, then one will necessarily act on it. But it is doubtful that the equation is that simple. It is easy to see that a just person will not knowingly commit acts of injustice, but what needs to be done to ensure that he or she will actively labor for the cause of justice? The will to act has to be nurtured and guided in the right direction in an educational process—this, besides the fostering of understanding and ardent desire. What is more, "will" is something that can be broken in a person, an institution or a community, and it often needs to be patiently rebuilt as part of a process of capacity building.

This much for the general characteristics of what we should expect from our institute process. Let us now examine some of the more specific features of the main sequence of courses with which you have been involved for several years. Because, by now, you know more about it than I do, it will be difficult for me not to repeat things you have already read in the books of the sequence and other relevant documents. In fact, a number of times I will have to almost quote from some of those documents. I do hope, however, that the overall treatment of the subject will offer you a few insights that will help you in your reflections.

First: The courses offered by your institutes, we have said, try to respond to the needs of entry by troops. They have been developed in accordance with a particular understanding of large-scale expansion and consolidation, one that views it as the movement of receptive populations towards the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. This movement is eminently spiritual. It occurs fundamentally in the hearts and minds of individuals, but gradually manifests itself in the entire social, economic, and cultural pattern of life and in institutional structure. Teaching in its broadest sense propels this movement. The training institute is an engine that drives the movement at this particular stage in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan.

Second: It is natural to expect that individuals within a population will not tread their spiritual paths at the same pace. At any given moment the population will present a continuum of responses, from the indifference of those who are barely aware of the existence of the Cause, to the intense devotion of those who have dedicated their lives to its promotion. The classification of Bahá'ís in mutually exclusive categories—active and inactive, deepened and undeepened, spiritualized and unspiritualized—has little place in this view of entry by troops. Even undue emphasis on a Bahá'í/non-Bahá'í duality proves to be harmful in that it creates unnecessary barriers to the progress of individual souls and reinforces an inward mindset that impedes large-scale expansion.

Third: The spiritual transformation of a people is an organic process that must be propelled from within by forces of transformation directly generated by the power of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, which are allowed to grow in strength and range of influence. In a closely-knit worldwide network of Bahá'í communities, it is natural and highly desirable to have an exchange of resources among them, and in almost every instance, this spiritual movement has to begin in a given population by someone coming from some other place. But if expansion is to reach the level of entry by troops, an increasing number of individuals from within the population have to rise and assume ownership of the process. The guidance of the institutions of the Faith, of course, is not to be considered intervention from outside, for these—whether local, regional, national, continental, or international—belong to every population in which the seed of a Bahá'í community has begun to germinate.

Fourth: The spiritual dynamics of the educational process that fosters the movement of a people towards the Bahá'í civilization is essentially the same for the poor and the rich, for the villagers and the urban dwellers, the educated and the illiterate. All new believers must have the benefit of a nurturing process that allows them to become confirmed in the Faith as they gradually dedicate more time and resources to its service. A few individuals, no matter how outstanding, how knowledgeable and how dedicated, cannot take exclusive responsibility for this nurturing process if the rate of enrollments is to become significant. A process of the development of human resources is needed that focuses on those who are willing and able to learn and to move faster so that they can dedicate themselves to assisting their fellow believers and to helping new souls recognize the Manifestation of God for today.

These points led those who initiated the experience of the Ruhi Institute to view human resource development in a particular way, that is: as a process that creates in an increasing number of individuals whole-hearted dedication to the spiritual development of their people. The training institute, which is the agency entirely focused on this process, must, of course, address the spiritual growth of the individual participant of its programs. But an individual's spiritual condition and his or her progress are matters that only God can judge. The Ruhi Institute was acutely aware of this fact. It did not wish to assume in any way the responsibility of measuring people's spirituality or even the extent of their knowledge of the Revelation. The Institute adopted a pedagogical approach that concerns itself exclusively with ways in which individuals can be helped to increase their capacity to serve. This capacity is without a doubt intimately connected to spirituality,

but the relation need not be defined precisely. It is sufficient to know that the field of service represents an environment within which spirituality can be cultivated.

The sequence of courses we are examining, then, is not arranged according to a series of subject matters, chosen with the specific goal of increasing an individual's knowledge of the Faith. If that were the case, this particular sequence would have never been selected. The content and the order are based on a series of acts of service, the practice of which creates capacity in the individual to meet the needs of large-scale expansion and consolidation. The development of such capacity is viewed in terms of "walking a path of service". On such a path the friends are assisted first in accomplishing relatively simple tasks and then in performing more complex and demanding acts of service. This is the nature of capacity building. Someone accompanies you as you learn to walk the path by yourself. If you fall, there is somebody close by to give you a hand. Mistakes are accepted. Confidence is gradually built. Setting grandiose goals and whipping up enthusiasm through constant emotional appeals are avoided.

Nevertheless, the goals set for the overall process are quite ambitious. The path leads to great heights and the vision of these heights becomes increasingly clear as one advances along the path. Yet each individual is allowed to learn to contribute to the overall objectives according to his or her own understanding, desire and will, all of which grow as individuals move forward, some rapidly and some at a slow pace.

The choice of the acts of service addressed in the sequence is dictated by at least two sets of considerations. The first has to do with strategies for community development. Yesterday, we talked about building capacity in the three protagonists of the Plan—the individual, the community and the institutions. In a process of large-scale expansion and consolidation, the development of capacity at the level of the community involves implementing a sequence of activities, according to well-conceived strategies arising from actual experience. The lack of such strategies was one of the reasons the process of entry by troops could not be sustained in the decades past. Too much was asked of nascent communities and institutions, particularly Local Assemblies, the establishment and full functioning of which are, of course, the ardent desire of every Bahá'í who appreciates the significance of the Administrative Order. The acts of service treated in the main sequence of courses, then, are intended to set in motion a process that will lead to the sound development of local communities or, as envisioned in the Five Year Plan, of clusters. A plan of growth for the cluster is, in some sense, embedded in the sequence of courses, a fact that by now must be apparent to you.

The other determinant of the content and order of the books, to which I have alluded earlier, is to be found in the dynamics of service itself. The skills needed to perform one act of service must benefit from skills already acquired. Of course, there is a great deal of individual leeway in this respect. No laws are broken if someone jumps from Book 1 to Book 4, and back to Book 2, and so on. In some cases, this may even increase the effectiveness of the courses for a specific group of people. But, on the whole, the pedagogical reasons for the order need to be understood and respected.

It is a fact borne by experience that, wherever large-scale expansion occurs, the vast majority of those who enter the Faith need to follow a sequence that starts with relatively simple acts of service and gradually builds ability and confidence. The worldwide experience with the sequence of courses prepared by the Ruhi Institute, however, began in many cases with Bahá'ís who were already deepened in the Faith and capable of carrying out rather complex acts of service. So visiting someone and sharing a prayer or presenting a deepening theme seemed trivial in a certain sense. But it is interesting to note that, in many of the places where certain books were initially set aside or the practice of skills treated too hastily, the friends ended up going back and undertaking a more thorough study of the full sequence when faced with the challenge of multiplying the core activities of the Five Year Plan. One can be extremely able in many complex areas of service, but have difficulty with apparently simple ones. For example, striking up the kind of conversation that leads naturally to an invitation to join a devotional meeting or a study circle is proving formidable in regions where social conditions make opening community activities to seekers a challenge. Sharing a prayer or two with a few friends, as required by the first book of the sequence, or practicing how to engage people in conversations on spiritual themes, as encouraged by the second book, are among the ways that one can begin to develop the skills required.

In applying the main sequence of courses as they stand, then, there has to be some degree of flexibility, but without sacrificing the specific pedagogical requirements of the material. In general, the pedagogy, as I understand it, has the intention to weave together a number of elements that are sometimes held in opposition to one another, but in reality are not. In fact, one hopes that as individuals progress through the courses, the tendency to reduce reality to a set of dichotomies will gradually be overcome. You already know how the material strives to achieve this aim.

The books endeavor to make explicit the complementarity of “being” and “doing”. They try to convey the idea that perfection of an individual’s character naturally finds expression in efforts to serve others, while one’s desire to serve others enhances the refinement of one’s character. We cannot wait all our lives with the hope of reaching a state of inner perfection before we act. Even the smallest of flames gives warmth and light. In fact the flame cannot help but to give warmth. Motivation to serve comes from within, and one arises to render service not out of a begrudging sense of duty but because service is a natural state of being.

This simultaneous concern with “being” and “doing” is reflected in the way the sequence of courses strives to foster true understanding. The pedagogy in question does not deny the possibility of reaching the shores of true understanding through mere study, meditation and prayer. Understanding is a gift bestowed by God, and He will confer it on whomsoever He pleases, as He pleases. Yet it is doubtful that understanding in the context of acquiring capacity to effect the dual transformation we discussed yesterday can be fully developed in a pedagogy that ignores the role of action in fostering understanding and promotes the pursuit of erudition outside the field of service.

Another challenge the material tries to meet is how to address the question of consciousness raising, while at the same time reinforcing effort to move towards a state of selflessness. Although the two are not contradictory, consciousness raising, if approached inadequately, can lead to self-centeredness. The process can be distorted by focusing too much attention on one's self. "My interests", "my talents", "my service", "what I can do for the Cause", "my personal initiative"—these are, in themselves, legitimate concerns of one who wishes to arise and serve. But if they become the central issue occupying the mind, they sap energy and burden the soul. Judging from the results achieved so far around the world, the material in question does seem to demonstrate that it is possible to raise awareness of one's responsibilities, of one's opportunities, of the spiritual powers at one's disposal, without feeding the ego and without fanning the fire of excitement with self.

Other false dichotomies that the material attempts to avoid are the usual ones between the heart and the mind, between setting goals and being process-minded, between spirituality and systematic thinking. The books are intended to show that strategic, methodical thinking does not contradict passion and enthusiasm. One can be occupied with the most profound spiritual matters, and yet be willing to take care of the smallest practical details.

Another feature of the material is that its effectiveness depends on a rather quick pace of study, as well as the thorough deliberation of important matters. The result of this emphasis on what may sound to be opposite concerns is, it is hoped, the ability to avoid the kind of superficiality that treats everything—the complex and the simple—in the same way. In this respect, various levels of understanding are called for, and an effort has been made in the material to organize the content accordingly.

The study of the Bahá'í writings is, of course, at the heart of approach to learning adopted by the sequence of books. Learning to align one's thoughts and actions with the writings is an explicit aim of the entire sequence. In the pursuit of this aim, every effort is made to avoid both the kind of inflexible literalism that consists of "finding the right answer" to every question and the kind of relativism that promotes prolonged exchange of personal views on "what the quotation means to me." Respect for the diversity of opinions is fostered, while at the same time consensus is highly prized. The need for clear and precise answers in accordance with the teachings is clearly acknowledged, as is the indispensable nature of questions that do not admit simple answers.

To achieve all this, the role of the tutor, which is defined in rather complex terms, is essential. He or she is to encourage participation without pressuring any individual to speak, to discourage error without becoming the arbiter of truth, to promote adherence to the Writings without acting as a source of knowledge. The tutor is not an intermediary between the students and the Writings; his or her purpose is precisely to accustom the students with the practice of going to the source directly to explore the questions that will constantly arise as they try to walk their own path of service.

With all these features of the present sequence of courses being offered by your institutes you are already familiar. Books further along in the sequence will surely follow the same

pedagogical principles. In describing the material, I have been careful to choose phrases like “tries to”, “strives to”, “attempts to”. To what extent good intentions are actually realized in the material is a question that will only be answered as the process of entry by troops advances. All we can say right now is that the worldwide results at this time appear quite promising. I would like to bring today’s talk to a close by emphasizing a couple of points and then let you go off to your group reflections.

You have often heard that the methodology of the Ruhi Institute is participatory. This is, of course, an exigency of capacity building itself. None of us could develop the capacity to perform the kinds of acts of service the process of entry by troops requires of us by just being told about them. But what I would like to bring to your attention is that there is more than one dimension to this participation. There is, of course, the question of the method of teaching-learning. Lessons are designed so as to keep the participants engaged in the activity of the study group, and every effort is made to ensure that each individual takes charge of his or her own learning. How often a person speaks in a session or how eloquently he or she expresses ideas is not the issue here. What is at stake is the level of consciousness achieved, the will created, the desire aroused, and the degree to which what is being learned is internalized and translated into action.

But there is another dimension to the question of participation that needs to be fully appreciated. A quick look at education in another area may help us to briefly explore this dimension. Take the study of science, in which everyone here has been involved to a certain degree, some joyfully and others with measurable pain. We all realize that science is not what is written in textbooks; these give an account of the knowledge accumulated in the field and hopefully familiarize students with appropriate methods. But far beyond this is what scientists do. Scientific activity takes place in communities of scientists who are engaged in a common enterprise and participate in a discourse that has its roots in the conversation of scientists of the past, an ongoing discourse, to the advancement of which every scientist tries to contribute. So one can ask the question: When does one cease to be a student of science and become a scientist? Clearly studying the textbooks, listening to lectures, contributing to class discussions, and carrying out experiments in the school laboratory are only steps—for those who will become scientists—towards participation in the global scientific enterprise and its historical discourse.

Now, we are members of communities scattered across the globe that are engaged in the greatest of all enterprises, that of building a new civilization. Our conversations—conversations in action—about the various aspects of this enterprise are carried out in so many settings: the Nineteen Day Feast, meetings of Spiritual Assemblies and Committees, Summer Schools, deepening classes, conferences, teaching projects, social and economic development endeavors, and so on. The main sequence of courses of the training institute seeks to systematize a crucial aspect of our global discourse concerned with the advancement of the process of entry by troops. An increasing number of people in every corner of the globe are engaged in such conversations in a setting we call a study circle. The material we study organizes this conversation. It records the principal points

and ensures that our thoughts and actions are illumined by relevant passages from the writings of the Faith.

In this setting, the tutor of the study circle is saying something like this: “We are walking a path of service that allows us to contribute to the advancement of the process of entry by troops. The way we do this is by studying, acting and reflecting on action in the light of what we have studied. These materials have helped me develop some of the capabilities I need to walk this path. I believe they will help you as well. Thousands of other groups in the world are doing the same. They are having the same conversation and a vast experience is being created among peoples of every background under diverse conditions. What we do will be part of this global experience. What we say enriches the conversation. What we learn will be systematized and diffused among communities throughout the world by the institutions we have already established. Our participation in this study circle can be seen in this light. We are participating in a global learning process, learning that builds the capacity of the Bahá’í community to open wide its doors to the peoples of the world and enable them to enter the Tabernacle of the Covenant in troops.

Friends, yesterday in your smaller group meetings you examined how the capacity of your communities to foster the process of entry by troops has been enhanced during the past few years. Reflections today may continue on the theme of capacity building, but now focused on the individual. The main question is how the institute process—the books, the study circles, the institute campaigns, the tutors, the gathering of the tutors, the practice of the various acts of service—are contributing to the enhancement of the capacity of the individual believer in Australia to act as a protagonist of the Five Year Plan. Some specific questions may be:

How are the knowledge imparted in the courses and the understanding engendered helping the individual believer to contribute to the advancement of the process of entry by troops?

What are some of the insights the friends are getting from the study of the courses as to how the process of entry by troops can be advanced?

How is the use of the arts being addressed and appreciation for beauty enhanced?

What are some of the noticeable effects of the emphasis on the Creative Word?

To what extent are the courses serving as instruments for raising awareness of the roles and responsibilities of the individual believer?

What are some of the signs of increased consciousness that are readily observed?

Are their observable signs of increased desire and will to serve and to teach?

How is the ability to learn from experience enhanced?

In which ways does the individual believer in Australia see himself or herself as a participant in the discourse of the Baha’i community worldwide on how to advance the process of entry by troops?

In which ways does the individual believer in Australia see himself or herself as a protagonist in a global enterprise, the aim of which is to build a new civilization?