

The 27th Hasan M. Balyuzi Memorial Lecture

The Artist and the Grammarian

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I would like to express my appreciation for the opportunity given to me by the Association for Bahá'í Studies to present the Balyuzi Lecture. After giving a lot of thought to what I might say in this lecture, I decided to make a commentary—rather than offer what you might call a thesis—about two things that have concerned me, that is, the “mystic wayfarer” and the “grammarian.” We all have aspects of both of those conditions in each of us: on the one hand, we want to enthusiastically and with great zeal embrace the unknown, wandering a kind of invisible path in the hope of being confirmed in the living of our life; and on the other hand, we place limits on what life can manifest, afraid of going over the edge.

First, however, I want to make mention of my parents Otto Victor and Mary Jane Rogers. Although their cultural background was limited, as was their knowledge of religion, they nevertheless made it possible for me to have an education in art and ultimately to embrace the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. My father was a prairie wheat farmer in western Canada and he related to the land as a poet would. He placed a loving hand on nature and he longed for a beautiful return. My mother, on the other hand, labored to achieve order in the unpredictable environment of dry-land farming. They had a good marriage and, so, as a youth, I came to understand that if you married poetry and order you would be in very good hands. Thus when I embraced my gift as an artist, it seemed quite logical because it consisted of striving for order and being poetically intoxicated. That was my beginning and, naturally, when I discovered the Bahá'í

Teachings, there was a confirmation of the majesty and beauty—the artistry—of Bahá'u'lláh's Writings. His Revelation impressed me as being all-embracing and of such aesthetic potency, and it also embodied the idea of order, which appealed so much to my mind and my soul. I experienced the Sacred Writings as also embodying the language of art, so I came to understand that art was necessary for the development of higher consciousness. I am not sure that this fact is as fully appreciated as it might be. For example, we think of art as a decorative thing, but not necessarily as a means of education, as a means of elevating consciousness.

As I speak, images of some recent paintings will appear on the two screens before you. I don't intend to speak about them directly, but I thought it would be interesting for you to see them as a backdrop to the thoughts being advanced. There will be altogether four sets, and each set will remain on the screen for fifteen minutes. Now, if you don't like the works, this may seem like a bit of a torture. However, we artists often lament the fact that people go to the gallery and look at the title of a work then glance at the work and walk on. We may be losing our ability to appreciate the static art form, the form that is still.

I am very much moved by some of the statements in the Writings of the Báb where He speaks about motion as one condition of the divine creative act and stillness as another condition of that divine creative act; and then He says that, in reality, motion and stillness are one. This is one of the great beauties of pictorial art, of static art, because such art symbolizes and actually presents you with motion and stillness simultaneously. But you have to spend some time with it and take it in and allow that motion to begin to enter your consciousness, and you must also begin to appreciate its stillness. I sometimes think of the statement of Christ referring to the peace that passes beyond all understanding (Phil. 4:7). The whole nature of pictorial art has to do with the creation of a reality suspended between the material and spiritual realms, with the sense of peace being the inner condition reflective of the attributes of the soul. I am constantly amazed (and no doubt this is true of every discipline; I know it certainly is true of my discipline of painting) that the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh simply surrounds it, elevates it, and pushes it forward into the future. The

principles of compositional order that are sought in art can be experienced in the Sacred Writings, thus confirming the relationship of the arts to spiritual development.

I want to briefly touch on four commonly shared parts of any endeavor, and illustrate how my experience as an artist and as a Bahá'í has become an interwoven pattern. I think it would be very good for people to understand that the artistic process is encompassed by Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. And, indeed, our Plans are artistic in nature as conceived by the Universal House of Justice. They are, really, an attempt to develop the kind of understandings that lead to activity, an objectification of a new consciousness, as can be seen in the four core activities. So you could say that the Bahá'ís have a plan at work in the world for creating visible forms, striving for what in the art world we call "high art." It goes beyond that, of course, because this is the Plan of God, but it is interesting to reflect on the similarities.

The first of these four parts, or realities, that I want to touch on is the tremendous gift that we have: that of the *intellect*. I don't know if we contemplate often enough how amazing this gift is. We couldn't appreciate it enough if we got down on our knees every day and thanked our loving Creator for providing us with the mind.

The second of these realities is the opening, or—you could think of it in many ways—the *invitation*. We are given an intellect, but, immediately after having received it, we find that embedded in this phenomenon is a desire to move into the unknown, to embrace the unknown, to be attracted to the invisible, to the spiritual world. It is almost as if we are given the means and the capacity whereby to move through infinite space—which is an unknown kind of space—and it takes an enormous amount of courage just to go through the very first veil, let alone all the other veils that intervene over the course of our life. So I want to speak a little bit about space. For the artist, the way compositional elements are ordered in the rectangle of the canvas, called the "pictorial plane," becomes the means of developing a metaphor of life itself. Spatial relationships are of primary concern to pictorial art.

The third reality is that of *process*. I was very moved by the new book by

Nader Saiedi, *Gate of the Heart: Understanding the Writings of the Báb*. I found it enlightening, in part, because he has an entire section explaining the Writings of the Báb that have to do with divine creative action, and I want to make mention of that. Much of what the artist does has to do with the outcome of a particular process of creative action initiated in a given set of paintings.

The fourth reality is that of *form*. In the art world many individuals speak about “significant form” or “high art.” Significant form is the kind of form that is like an archetype: it has the capacity to generate all sorts of other works of art and it raises consciousness: it elevates the human soul and it is timeless. You look at it and you think: “This was done yesterday.” You blink and you look and you think: “No, this is something ancient; it is something that has always been.” These are the four parts of my presentation.

I want to first touch on *mind*. I know that, as Bahá'ís, we all know these things. But it doesn't hurt to come together on different occasions such as this one to be reminded of concepts and experience them once again while together. 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that “[t]his supreme emblem of God stands first in the order of creation and first in rank, taking precedence over all created things. Witness to it is the Holy Tradition, ‘Before all else God, created the mind.’ From the dawn of creation, It was made to be revealed in the temple of man” (*Secret* 1). Mind is what is essential in the human spirit, but it is very interesting that, even with this tremendous gift, it does not accomplish very much unless it is married to the spirit of faith. Then it can move mountains. This tremendous gift of God can remain static, or have limited movement, or perhaps produce some material result, but in the end it does not fulfill its potential unless it is combined with the spirit of faith. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said that “[t]he first attribute of perfection is learning and the cultural attainments of the mind. . . .” (*Secret* 35). This is why I really want to stress—not that I necessarily need to prove it to you—the importance of aesthetics in the development of the mind, to study and create that which is beautiful. We know this, of course, from the Revelation itself because it is pure beauty.

“From the dawn of creation it was made to be revealed in the temple of

man.” That is an amazing statement because it would appear from that statement (unless I am misunderstanding it) that mind was something created by God and then associated with, or deposited in, the human temple. So, it has a reality as a creation of God, and it is the moving force in the spiritual, intellectual, and social evolution of humanity. And then, of course, physically the brain was given to us as an instrument of that mind, so long as we exist on this plane. And let it be stressed again that this mind without the spirit of faith cannot move mountains, but with the spirit of faith it can. And that is why the power of the Creative Word is so great: because the Creative Word fires the imagination and quickens the mind.

I really think that it *restructures* the mind. I think that this wonderful prayer, the Tablet of Ahmad that we heard so beautifully sung and recited before our session began, was so moving. I really felt as if the very fiber of my being had been taken apart and reconstituted. And, of course, that is what the Creative Word of God does: it clarifies thought, and as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said, “The reality of man is his thought.” And that is why I think we are encouraged to commit the Word to memory, because the mind needs spiritual nourishment. I want to touch on that later—it is evolving and changing; its very architecture is capable (they believe now) of renewal over time, over our life span. We know that the House of Justice in 1989 said to us: “The Holy Word has been extolled by the Prophets of God as the medium of celestial Power and the wellspring of all spiritual, social and material progress.” Just think of that: “the medium of celestial Power.” Think of all the things that humanity does to gain power, when in our very hands we have the medium not just of physical power, but we also have the medium of celestial power: the Holy Word of God. And they went on in this letter to explain that it was vital, of course, to personal transformation and to the emergence of divine civilization.

A couple of decades ago, some very interesting experiments were made on the brain capacity of birds. The first researcher did his research with the birds locked up in cages. He was trying to discover whether or not brain cells could be regenerated, whether there was neurogenesis, because it was thought that creatures were born with a certain finite number of

brain cells—you had to make do with those for the rest of your life—and that brain cells did not regenerate. His research actually proved that brain cells did not regenerate; however, another researcher came along and did his research with birds in a supportive and natural environment and discovered that not only did the neurons regenerate, but also the rate at which they regenerated was quite amazing: something like 3 percent of the total number of cells regenerated every day. And this, in fact, made it possible for the birds to sing. After a certain period of time, the birds in the cages lose their capacity to sing because their brain cells are not being regenerated. I think that this is an interesting metaphor or analogy. Many of the things I want to mention tonight are in the sense of a metaphor. They do not complete the argument as a dissertation would—I don't necessarily have all the scientific evidence—but they stand as quite convincing metaphors. I was thinking of this in relationship to the Creative Word of God: how the Word creates an environment and an atmosphere (I would imagine that in the future science will be able to prove the regenerative power of the Sacred Word). The brain is the instrument for the mind, and that instrument can only be effective as the mind becomes enlightened. This is very important so long as we function in the material world. Thus we should be appreciative and careful of this trust of the intellect. In fact, 'Abdu'l-Bahá says:

O ye that have minds to know! Raise up your suppliant hands to the heaven of the one God and humble yourselves and be lowly before Him and thank Him for this supreme endowment and implore Him to succor us until, in this present age, God-like impulses may radiate from the conscience of mankind and this divinely kindled fire, which has been entrusted to the human heart, may never die away. (*Secret 2*)

It is of interest to note that this passage connects the gift of intellect to the human heart and thus instructs us that the two are a single reality.

I want to mention briefly, then, the relationship of mind to art, because sometimes people have felt that art is just "self-expression." Even artists are sometimes excused for not thinking very clearly because they are

poets and poets don't have to think: it is not really a thing of the mind, it is "self-expression." The philosopher Hegel said, "Thus to be truly beautiful, a thing must have an element of mind in it and indeed be a product of the mind." Further he says, "Insofar as works of art are produced by the mind, they are in themselves essentially spiritual." And then he relates it to nature. He says, "The beauty of nature exists for us as but a reflection of the beauty of mind, as a thing incomplete and imperfect in itself, the real substance of which is contained in the mind" (2). And that is not too surprising for we who are Bahá'ís because Bahá'u'lláh said: "Dost thou reckon thyself only a puny form /when within thee the universe is folded?" (*Seven Valleys* 34).

The way in which our mind exists, it would appear, is along similar lines to the principles of nature, and that is why we find nature so appealing: we could say that the "shape" of the mind is the "shape" of nature. And for understanding and appreciating art there is always this dilemma on the part of the public: they expect the artist to mimic nature. It has been said that "[a]rt is man's nature; nature is God's art." The nature of man is what is expressed in art; it is the sensuous aspect of the intellect which is present in a visual form. And in the Báb's Writings, apparently, from this wonderful new book (*Gate of the Heart*) the Báb has made it very clear that the entire universe was brought into existence to delight the human heart. We talk a lot about the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, but maybe we have not understood the effect that will occur in the future from the Twin Revelations, because the Báb's Revelation has to do with the heart being intoxicated, and you cannot have a World Order unless the hearts of its citizens are intoxicated, at least, not a World Order as envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh. The hearts have to have zeal and they have to be intoxicated.

The world of nature not only delights the human heart, but it also informs the mind as to the vastness of its own potential because, as we investigate the natural phenomena that exist, we also advance civilization and the mind becomes more opened as a result. The other really interesting relationship is to prove—if you need proof—that art is a spiritual enterprise (of course everything we do is a spiritual enterprise if it is done in the right spirit). 'Abdu'l-Bahá says that "no phenomenal organism can

be possessed of two forms at one time.” In other words, if a tree is being a tree, it can only be a tree while being a tree. But, He says, “The reality of man, the human spirit, is simultaneously possessed of all forms and figures without being bereft of any of them. It does not require transformation from one concept to another (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Promulgation* 260).

This is the spiritual nature of ourselves, and this is really interesting in relationship to painting—and I will give the example of Mark Tobey since some of you may know Mark Tobey’s paintings—when you look at a Mark Tobey painting, maybe the first thing you see is the texture of the painting, and then you blink your eyes and you see light, and then you look again and you see form. Thus, the texture of a Mark Tobey painting is not only composition, but it is also a means of holding the light. An effect in one part of the composition can appear as light, while in another it can appear as shade. We perceive in the “white writing” form, illumination, a tactical presence; we experience pattern, movement, and space, all at the same time, its execution convincingly rational but essentially spiritual.

This is the process of art and also, by the way (not to bring down what we are doing and try to say it’s “nothing but art”), one could say the very same thing about the effort that the Bahá’í world community is engaged in. This activity is essentially spiritual in nature, so it is multiple in its effect: a person can be embracing the Faith and learning of its history and acquiring zest for service simultaneously. Knowledge, inspiration, and action are one as in the act of painting. These elements become signs, become spiritual discoveries. Every painting of Mark Tobey is a kind of spiritual discovery. As Bahá’u’lláh says, “We will surely show them Our signs in the world and within themselves” (*Gleanings* 178).

And I love what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá says about the singer, because this speaks of the mysterious connections between things: the invisible connection, because, He says, nothing leaves the singer and enters another person that is listening to the singer. There is no actual transfer of anything material: “[N]othing comes forth from the singer which enters into the listener; nevertheless, a great spiritual effect is produced. Therefore, surely so great a connection between beings must have spiritual affect and influence” (*Some Answered Questions* 246). And then He says, “Although by

existing rules and actual science these connections cannot be discovered, nevertheless, their existence between all beings is certain and absolute. . . . the beings, whether great or small, are connected with one another by the perfect wisdom of God, and affect and influence one another” (*Some Answered Questions* 247).

Relationships motivate me because a painting is simply a set of differing qualities and quantities, and the amount of knowledge that comes about as a result of these juxtapositions of a high visual order is profound. In fact, the way in which we must have become conscious in the first place was by comparing things. We saw that one thing looked this way, or we experienced night and we experienced day and we took note of the difference between night and day and that raised our consciousness. So experiencing difference is very important to learning. At the same time, if relationships are perceived in depth, one can begin to sense the oneness of reality.

Space is an invitation for travel in the unknown, both for the artist and the wayfarer. The artist must carry out a physical design in space while also incorporating space in the configurations used. The mystery of time and space is also at play because beyond the physical a spiritual journey is underway. Within the pictorial frame, the artist is constantly working, as a composer orchestrates music, seeking deeply felt arrangements in the hope that the space within which the arrangements exist will somehow become filled with meaning. The whole idea of space—what space actually is—is fascinating. Scientists don’t know the true reality of physical space; it was once called “ether,” and now it is called the “dark” force. There are all kinds of investigations going on. Perhaps one day they will actually prove what Bahá’u’lláh says, that it is in actual fact the love of God—which is so fantastic an idea that it would be hard for the present generation to believe. But He did say that if the love of God were to be withdrawn, the physical universe would collapse. And I think that although the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh are, of course, beautiful and poetic, they are also accurate: they are not mere metaphors; they have accuracy.

Although the idea of space is, to an artist, fascinating, it is also frightening because it presents infinite possibilities once one becomes engaged. A refined discipline in the use of materials and means is critical, but to

delay engagement in endless calculations will prevent creative evolution. I think that this is what was being talked about in the Four Valleys when the mystic wayfarer arrived at a great sea, which I imagine as a vast undefined space. The mystic knower knew immediately that movement within this space would lead him to what was desired, so he entered it without delay, whereas the grammarian hesitated. Of course, we do that all the time. I don't think it is an "either/or": some of the time we are hesitating, and some of the time we are going over the edge. And, of course, every time we do go over the edge, we are astounded at the results; as confidence and courage grow, greater and greater realities are made manifest. From this metaphor it is clear that, in order to move, we have to clear the deck, so to speak, but often we are preoccupied, so filled with concerns and anxieties and maybe even duties, or plans—maybe we can even over-plan at times—we are so attached that movement becomes difficult; our condition blocks our movement in that infinite realm. And yet, were we to transcend that limitation, tremendous victories are waiting us, whether a work of art or whatever achievement in the Faith we want to carry out.

I walk into the studio and I see an empty canvas. Recently I had some large canvases constructed for me, 5' x 7', which is thirty-five square feet of surface to keep alive, because the surface of a painting has to be sustained in time and in space. And, believe me, it is not easy to fine-tune it as a musician does with a musical instrument and to achieve what architects call "architectonic tension." Like a good piece of music, its presence is absolutely precise; it sings, it vibrates in just the right fashion because all of the parts are connected, and the "whole" or "significant form" is achieved. The philosophers of art equate this truth of form or "being at one with a greater reality" with the highest possible achievement for the artist as a mystic seeker. This fact is implied in what the mystic knower said: "The death of self is needed here, not rhetoric: Be nothing, then, and walk upon the waves" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Seven Valleys* 52). So, you see, it is possible, and I think of this every time I go into the studio because the way I work I have absolutely no idea what the painting is going to look like, or how it is going to evolve. It isn't that I'm mindless, because I bring my

mind to that edge and then I allow the process to move me forward. I run very hard to stay behind the process, to keep up with it. I don't try to completely control it because the process has almost a mind of its own, or it has a motion of its own which we intelligently have to follow and enhance.

Cezanne, the great painter sometimes referred to as the father of modern painting, at least in the Western sense, said, "If I think, I'm lost." He didn't mean to say that we should abandon our rational intellect, but rather that our rational intellect brings us to the point at which we can intelligently, in a sense, abandon it or at least set ourselves free of its limitations and allow the process to educate us. And it does so every time; this is the amazing thing. This phenomenon can be seen in the infallible guidance of the Universal House of Justice because they have presented us with a Plan that from every standpoint is "true to form." If you were a very educated and experienced artist and you investigated the Plan of the House of Justice, you would be completely satisfied that it meets all the criteria of great works of art. This is what is so confirming to me as an artist. I don't think that anyone's paintings are more rational or more intellectual than Cezanne's but, nevertheless, he indicates that if one hesitates, one loses the way. Also, there is a mystery in the invitation that his use of space offers. In Cezanne's paintings of mountains, he was one of the first artists to start leaving white gaps or blank spaces in between the various brush strokes or clusters; there was a lot of empty canvas, and writers have said that it made it possible for the viewer's mind to move into those empty spaces and occupy them, thus completing the picture and becoming, in a sense, at one with the spiritual essence of the work.

At the same time as Cezanne was making his paintings, physicists were beginning to discover that space wasn't simply a curtain that hung behind everything, that everything was in space and space was in everything. It was an entirely new concept of space which a physicist could explain to you better than I. My interest in the "language of space" was further enlarged by some recent research on brain function because—again getting back to neurons—it was thought that neurons (in case you don't know, you have something like two billion of them in your brain) were all connected together in one way like an electrical wire and then connected

into a central location somewhere. Then, with the development of high-power electron microscopes, they were able to discover that each neuron is contained within its own membrane. Every one of these two billion neurons is a separate entity. The scientists were really perplexed because they said to themselves, "Well then how do they communicate?" Every memory takes place because of a changed connection between two neurons or one cluster of neurons and another cluster of neurons. Every memory, every thought, requires a connection between the two, so if they are bound by a membrane, how do they connect? If neurons do not touch each other, how do they form memories and exchange information?

Memory is a fascinating phenomenon. By the way, you don't actually *remember* everything because, by the time you get around to remembering, your brain has so completely changed that the memory is not exact. The brain does not exist in a static state. Perhaps this is the reason why husbands and wives can never agree on what happened in a shared experience, when it happened, and how it happened, and who was there. Anyway, the remarkable conclusion that was made—and this is very inspiring for me as an artist—is that the vacant gaps between the cells are where the real information is taking place. And they even put a word on it, as scientists have a need to do; they called them "synaptic clefts," and they say that these spaces are the "secret sites" of communication: the space between things.

Look at this painting (see cover reproduction of "Appearance of Light II"): the painting is about the space between things. It is not about a landscape, it is not about the sky; it is about connections made (communication between things) throughout the space. Observe how the central pink plane provides a space for the movement of shapes up to the top and down to the bottom, how the cool gray at the bottom "speaks to" the warm tones at the top, how the white shape on the lower right "communicates" with the black shape seen on the top right, and how that black shape has a further relationship to the parallel horizontal lines spaced from top to bottom on the left side, and also to the dark passage on the bottom far left.

There are many other complex relationships at work in this pictorial space, such as between the vertical, horizontal, and diagonal divisions of the space. However, this may be enough to indicate that the "spiritual

memory” or the “meaning” of this work is the result of a set of visual elements which exchange information and are mutually supportive of each other in the compositional scheme.

If you are not educated in art, looking at pictures such as this one would likely be less educative. You would miss opportunities, I think, to elevate your consciousness because aesthetics is an aspect of mind. It is not an additional thing; it is not what we might call “culture,” as in “It would be nice to be more cultured, so let’s buy a painting and hang it above our couch.” There is nothing wrong with that—ornamentation is fine—but the educative need is greater than that; understanding and experiencing the creative process as an integral part of community development is vital in terms of the advancement of society. It has always been that way, hasn’t it? Every culture, every civilization, elevated its people and advanced its civilization and imbued its spiritual principles by means of aesthetics, and often artistic form was one of the main means. The Universal House of Justice is encouraging the creation of a new mind, so we have to consider the arts as an aspect of building that new mind and do a lot more, if we can, than we have been doing.

Another dimension the brain researchers are working on (which I don’t understand but am fascinated by nevertheless) is that in this conversation that is taking place between the neurons across the space, actually some time is passing, and so they are investigating how the passage of time in the conversation between the neurons actually begins to reconstitute the architecture of the brain. One can imagine that in the future all such complexities of the creative dynamic will impact educational programs, and even such things as the language of high art will be more fully understood as essential to intellectual and social progress.

What happens in a painting is that there are all of these elements and, over time, as you work on the painting, they seem to unfold their destiny in the pictorial scheme.

Giving a talk, by the way, is very much like making a painting. You have a relationship between a speaker and the audience, and you have the space between them. And, believe me, as any of you who has tried to give a presentation knows, it is quite a frightening thing to pass through a kind of

veil and engage the audience and still hold your own ground and transmit significant meanings from your set of understanding to another set the audience may have.

So, for the artist, space is both a physical and a spiritual process. In the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "It is said that Moses in the wilderness heard the voice of God, but that wilderness, that holy land, was His Own heart." Isn't that interesting that he would say that about Moses, that that wilderness was his own heart? "All of us," 'Abdu'l-Bahá continues, "when we attain to a true spiritual condition, can hear the Voice of God speaking to us in that wilderness" (in Rabb 42). So, I think that the artist (and, I would say, Bahá'í activity) seeks to so order a composition that one will sense the confirmation of the Holy Spirit in it.

There is much more to be said about space, but now I want to mention process. I think we naturally have a fear of process because we have a sense of how majestic it is, and we are a little bit afraid that we might lose our identity so we hold back. We do not plunge ourselves into this unknown sea because it is a fearful leap to make, and we are quite concerned about possibly causing harm to ourselves, as maybe we should be. It probably is important to maintain our identity; maybe we would lose our mental faculties if we did not hang on in a certain way. But the interesting thing is that it seems as though it is impossible to sacrifice it; you only think you are sacrificing, so you never really do relinquish your sanity. But, nevertheless, the fear is real.

Everybody loves waterfalls, I think, because they are a symbol or a metaphor for us: we see ourselves in the waterfall and we envy the waterfall because when the waterfall comes to the edge, it goes over it: it does not hold back. Fortunately it doesn't have free will—I mean, fortunately for it—and, fortunately for us, we do have free will because consciousness leads us to making choices, and it is these important moments of decision that propel life forward. If you stand on the edge and you don't go over, that is a choice that likely will affect your ability for future actions. Your destiny is going to be determined by whether or not you make certain choices, and also by the choices you do make. The waterfall just goes over the edge and it experiences a lot of turmoil: it falls over the rocks, it foams

up, it changes its form, it is quite agitated, but eventually it reaches an entirely new form—whether it is a lake or whatever—and it realizes, “I am the same. I am still water, but I have a new form. I have been transformed; I haven’t lost my identity.” It is a simple analogy, but one we could think about when confronted with the need for critical change in our life process. I have found that with every person that I have tried to interest in the Faith in my life as a Bahá’í teacher, there is always a moment of standing on the edge and helping that person to take that jump, and you have to take the jump with them. We are one with the process that engages us.

Scientist Freeman Dyson said, “The more I examine the Universe and study the details of its architecture, the more evidence I find that the Universe in some sense must have known that we were coming” (qtd. in Barrow and Tipler 318). Isn’t that lovely? So, you see, if you relinquish a little bit of control and fear and go over the barrier, you will find that the path ahead was waiting for you, and all of the things that you need will be there. This has been my experience. For example, I often do not know how to move the development of a painting forward: I am fearful of losing the good things the image already has, but as soon as I take steps that challenge the status quo, a whole new set of possibilities becomes available, and the things that I liked are replaced by things I like even more. But the trouble is, it has to be the result of our own thinking process, because God does not want a bunch of zombies, people who are programmed to act without understanding. However, understanding has limited value if it does not bring you to the edge of greater achievement. You have to stand on that edge, make a choice, hold your breath, and jump.

I give you another nice example. There was recent research done on a certain kind of butterfly. These butterflies had migrated to a new region where they had not existed before and promptly began to be eaten en masse by the birds. Now, in that same region there was another species of butterfly that the birds did not eat because, apparently, they tasted very sour and the birds had learned, over time, not to eat them. The new flock of butterflies that had migrated into the region, if you can believe it—and they don’t know how they did it—changed their coloring completely to imitate the butterflies that tasted sour in that region: a change that was so

complete it went right down to a little speck of black on the underside of the left wing that was so small you could barely see it. They mimicked the exact coloration of that other species of butterflies, and the birds stopped eating them even though they didn't taste sour.

I think of ourselves in that way: we have to be careful that we are not eaten; we had better change our colors and fit in with the guidance of the Universal House of Justice because we are migrating. It is a new process. But the other result of this research—which I found even more fascinating—was that evolution has the power to constantly make changes, to adjust to whatever the requirements of the moment are. The process of evolution has built into it the capability for endless variation and change. However, the secret template is inalterable; it cannot be changed, it is sacred; it can never be destroyed. So is the system, or the evolutionary process that produced the butterflies in the first place: they radically changed their coloration, but they could not change the way in which species evolve: the built-in process is a divine, sacred template that is inalterable. I thought this was a marvelous way to explain progressive revelation because religion is a phenomenon, a process, that can undergo constant change and adaptation to the needs of the age, but the sacred template is inalterable. It is still the religion of God, “eternal in the past, eternal in the future,” as Bahá'u'lláh said (*Kitáb-i-Aqdas* par. 182). So there is lots of evidence, even in the scientific world, that we can use to understand the nature of process and what we are about in the process of entry by troops.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá says that “[a]ll sciences, knowledge, arts, wonders, institutions, discoveries and enterprises come from the exercised intelligence of the rational soul” (*Some Answered Questions* 217). That is why I used that sentence by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in an essay that was published in a book on my paintings, because He says “The first condition of perception”—and to an artist the whole idea of perception is very powerful because it means to see and to be moved by—“in the world of nature is the perception of the rational soul.” To exercise the intelligence of the rational soul indicates the importance of engaging aesthetic awareness. The principles of beauty do not stand apart from intellect; rather, they are part of the very nature of intelligence.

There is a very interesting thing about physical light and its companion, enlightenment, that I want to share with you. One of the great architects of America, Louis Kahn, spoke about how a beautiful form—a beautiful building or any beautiful form—does not really know that it is beautiful because it has no way of seeing its own beauty. But the moment it invites light to enter in (he was talking about the importance of windows in architecture) the window brings light into the inner form of the building, the light envelops the form, and the form becomes aware, so to speak, of its own beauty, and the light becomes aware of its own reality because it has a form within which to relate. Thus, even in physical relationships of light in terms of an architectural work, there is the idea of enlightenment. This wonderful duality of everything: illumination in terms of the Creative Word of God is the equivalent of the physical light being invited and entering into the form of ourselves and transforming the form and telling the form how beautiful it is. Look at how beautiful this individual was that stood before us and played his music and recited the Tablet of Aḥmad. We saw and experienced the beauty of that soul because that soul had invited the light to enter it and the light was entering it and describing it and we were experiencing it. That is art. We experienced art; we wouldn't have needed this presentation at all. However, I was invited, so here I am.

Now, something more about process. Of course it is difficult; it is a combination of order, preparation, and conscious knowledge. It has to be imaginative—that's where we fall down. The beloved Hand of the Cause Amatu'l-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánum used to tell us so often: "The Bahá'ís don't lack sincerity. They lack imagination. If they could only imagine more, we could accomplish so much more." The poetic aspect of every endeavor is absolutely crucial to its success because without poetry there is no intoxication and we seem to like to be intoxicated, or we need to be. We're designed to be "on fire." Imagine, if God brought the entire universe into existence to delight the human heart, the extent to which our loving Creator has gone to delight us, to give us zeal and enthusiasm. That's a tall order. The universe is rather large: two billion suns in our galaxy, which is considered one of the smaller galaxies.

Here is another metaphorical example of process. I was inspired by

Philippe Petit, a French tightrope walker who in 1974 strung a cable between the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York and walked across it. The security people rushed up to take him off the wire. He came within three feet of the edge of one of the buildings, waved at them, laughed, turned around, and ran back to the middle of the wire. This was astonishing. There is a documentary about him, called *Man on Wire*, and it won an Academy Award in 2008 for Best Documentary. He said he was doing this as a symbolic gesture: he wanted to connect people's hearts. He had a hard time of it because there were so many times during the preparation when he doubted that he could do it. He prepared for six years. He had seen a drawing of the twin towers in a magazine in a dentist's office, and he determined at that moment that he was going to string a wire and walk between them. For six years he studied how this could be done. He went to the building and visited it a number of times when it was under construction and he examined every aspect of the building and he tested the wind strength that would need to be factored into his approach. It was very rigorous.

I thought about this in the same way that the Bahá'í world community tested the process of teaching and consolidation. Over years we gathered the information and experience that was necessary, and now we can walk the tightrope of "entry by troops" because we are prepared. We can do it now. And he had to suspend his disbelief. It's a famous philosophic statement, the suspension of disbelief. He had doubts. And do you know what he said? "This is not a stunt. It's a desire to carry my life through a difficult process by the means of art." He was a bit of a radical, but such a heart. He wanted to connect in a symbolic way the peoples of the world as represented by these two buildings. They arrested him. He said the most frightening thing about this whole experience was being arrested and pushed down the stairs. And then later on they gave him the key to New York and honored him and he moved to the United States.

Process must lead to something, so now let us give some consideration to the idea of form because consciousness has to arrive at a point where it has some kind of substance, some kind of reality that you can touch. It is one thing to have the intellect; it is another thing to have the courage to move through space and to adopt methodologies of process. But those

three factors have to conclude by building something that will influence civilization or that will be civilizing. After the application of mind to movement and to process, a visible entity must appear: something of real substance. In art, we say that the work in the studio has resulted in the “art object.” These concrete forms thus produced have the potential to become the cultural archetype housed in a public space such as a museum. Once the greater public is surrounded by significant forms, a transformational atmosphere can emerge. When one examines historic advances in civilization, one can see that they were brought about by new forms which attracted the participation of the people. In the current world Plan of the international Bahá’í community, the core activities can be understood as concrete “units of civilization,” each designed and evolved to become a transformational entity. No better atmosphere could be imagined for the objectification of a process engaging large numbers of the public and leading to the renewal of civilization. The culture of learning called for is to be a new creation made visible by devotional gatherings, study circles which absorb the Creative Word and take action, and educational programs for children and youth which create in them capacity to become progenitors of change.

I am inspired by the section of Nader Saiedi’s book, *Gate of the Heart*, concerning the stages of divine creative action because he talks about the treatise that the Báb wrote on grammar, where he says that in the future children will be taught the spiritual foundation of grammar, and he mentions the ideas of *verb* and *noun*, and the *preposition* which is the connecting link between verb and noun. And then he says that the verb is like our will and the noun is determination and the preposition is our destiny because it is the connection between will and determination (205–6). Without will and determination there is no connection; there is no relationship. Will and determination connect in a space and that space is our destiny. This is the frightening thing: if you do not move into that space, there is no process and no object and your destiny cannot be realized.

I remember one night, in the Pilgrim House at the Bahá’í World Centre, member of the Universal House of Justice Hooper Dunbar saying that if you do not make your contribution to the Bahá’í Cause, that contribution

will never be made because no one else can make your particular contribution. Your offering is totally unique: it is a result of your will and your determination: it is your destiny. Your destiny is what you can lay before Bahá'u'lláh. The Faith will go on and make tremendous progress, but it will forever be deprived of your part, and that is a sobering thought. For human beings' true destiny is the agreement of their own will with the Divine Will. That is the struggle. It is also a struggle at the level of an artist because the force generated by an act of will must be applied over decades of time before important art objects can be determined, and that will can only be sustained by intimate contact with the Concourse on High.

Having a given talent and the desire to witness its realization, being unafraid to enter an unknown space, and even having a workable process in hand, cannot guarantee progress. Harmony with the Divine Will is essential: "O Thou Lord of all nations! I have desired only what Thou didst desire, and love only what Thou dost love" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations* 318). I would not suggest that my paintings are a result of the direct intervention of the Divine Will—I am not so foolish as to make that claim—but the Writings do say that it is the workings of the Celestial Concourse that influence the coming into being of the art object. For human beings, it is of great assurance to have guidance free from error in the path of service to God and knowledge of spiritual principle in pursuit of one's profession. The realm of the heart is the throne of God, and it must take delight in its agreement with the Divine Will. And, as Bahá'u'lláh says, "All that which ye potentially possess can, however, be manifested only as a result of your own volition. Your own acts testify to this truth" (*Gleanings* 149).

Just another word about a "mind-set" that leads to the creation of form. I love what the philosopher Teilhard de Chardin mentions because it seems to me that he was describing what the Bahá'í world community is now engaged in, as well as providing a very good definition of the process of art. (This is out of context a bit, but I think you will get the idea very easily.) He says, "From our experimental point of view, reflection is, as the word indicates, the power acquired by a consciousness to turn in upon itself, to take possession of itself *as of an object*. . . ." (165). This statement

relates directly to the practice of art because, really, every work of art comes into being as a result of reflection, of experience, giving shape to the art object. The more effort you make, and the more works of art you look at and create, the more you are able to acquire the attributes necessary to transform thought into significant form, into high art, into the greatness that characterizes true civilization. But that consciousness will not remain with you; it dissipates very quickly without continuance in its practice. That is why our present Plan is so beautiful: the practice is built right into the process. It is not passive learning. I could go into the studio every morning and stare at the canvas, and the results would be nil. I have to act. I have to take my reflection into the field of action. Then the beautiful thing is that, when the object arrives, it becomes a form by which we can contemplate and even gain further insight.

I look at my own art—it is not an egotistical thing—but I enjoy it; I learn from it because it has taken place as part of a process that is larger than I am, representing more than I am able to think of at a given moment, and so it educates me. It is back and forth, back and forth. And this is exactly what our Plan is: the reflection of the cluster as a unit of consciousness, like a work of art, is made up of all kinds of points and relationships moving in the direction of giving birth to a new world. I don't want to over-stress relationships of art to the present development in the work of the Cause, but, as in art, a significant form is like a polished mirror within which the people want to see themselves reflected. The presence in a region of a highly developed cluster, as Teilhard de Chardin would say, "a unity that is conscious of its own organisation" (165), becomes like a mirror which attracts everyone. People ask about paintings, "Why do I like a certain painting?" Well, you like it because you see yourself in it. If a painting is good enough, it reflects universal principles. And when it reflects those principles, you are able to associate with them because your nature is constituted by God in like manner. You are being elevated from within; you are raised to a new level because you are made aware of your own spiritual nature. And if these clusters are raised to the level of art, so to speak, then people would see themselves in them and would naturally gravitate to them. I don't want to completely deviate from his statement because he

goes on to say that “[b]y this individualization of himself, in the depth of himself which heretofore had been spread out and divided over a diffuse circle of perceptions and activities . . .” (165). This is like we were in our stage of development before the present Plan. We were acquiring capacity for the present Plan. We were involved in a diffuse circle of perceptions and activities—isn’t that true?—for many decades. We were acquiring understanding about the nature of process itself so we would be able to apply it to the process of entry by troops.

He continues with the observation that this business of being in a diffuse circle of perception and activities becomes constituted as a center, in the form of a point at which all the impressions and experiences knit themselves together and fuse into a unity that is conscious of its organization. Doesn’t that ring a bell? And, further, he boldly states: “The consequences of such a transformation are immense, visible as clearly in nature as in any of the facts according to the physics or astronomy.” I replaced his word “being” with “community”: “The *community* which is the object of its own reflection, in consequence of its very doubling back upon itself becomes, in a flash, able to raise itself into a new sphere.” It’s a very beautiful analogy of what we are engaged in.

I want to conclude by asking you to think about the Plan as having this great beauty, and to think of all of you as being artists because we are all engaged in a creative endeavor. I did not give the title to this presentation “The Artist and the Grammarian” to make the assumption that I, as an artist, was somehow superior. The artist that I was speaking about is the artist that we all are: one in possession of mind, standing at the edge of an infinite space, not fearful of going over the edge or fearful of losing our identity, engaged in a process leading to concrete results, and acting in “the spirit of faith.” Pierre-Yves read a sentence from an essay of mine in his introduction to this presentation which indicated that over my lifetime I have experienced over and over again that within the creative act lies the expectation of being inspired, being confirmed by knowing that you have always been assisted. It is guaranteed. There are countless Writings that guarantee it, so we do not need any further evidence of that.

To conclude, I would like to challenge primarily the youth. I was struck

by the degree to which President Obama engaged the youth through the use of cyberspace. Whether this movement with such great potential will have long lasting results in the outside world is doubtful, but within the Bahá'í Cause the implications of such an engagement of youth are considerable. It is amazing to think that millions of souls responded to a vision of change and hope and the three simple words: "yes, we can." How could that begin to compare to the power of the Creative Word of God, "the medium of celestial power"? Think about the numbers of people who would be servants of this Cause if this power of the Word were mindfully employed.

Cyberspace is not my medium because I am a hopelessly old-fashioned artist—but I am hoping that the youth will take up this new medium, and I would urge them to initiate spiritual conversations in this space, be the mystic knower not the grammarian, be a new kind of artist. These spiritual conversations need to be elevated ones that are aesthetically meritorious: they have to have excellence. And they can combine words, music, and images. I was reminded of a statement in the Four Valleys that

Every semblance, every shape that perisheth today
In the treasure-house of Time is safely stored away.
When the world revolveth to its former place,
Out of the invisible He draweth forth its face. (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Seven Valleys* 56 n. 30)

I was thinking about how, in medieval times, Christianity was spread rapidly by means of the woodcut. Most people were illiterate—a lot of people today apparently are illiterate—but at that time the majority of people could not be enlightened by the printed word so the visual power of woodcut images, easily multiplied, was a powerful teaching agent. Later on, this form evolved to the much higher art form of illuminated manuscripts. I had the thought that this could relate to what the passage quoted above was saying—although it would not really matter if we made a mistake and thought of it as applying to that and acted on it: we would not go wrong because Bahá'u'lláh is telling us that, out of the invisible, that which is

stored can come back. So illuminated manuscripts can “come back,” in part, I think, by means of concrete forms within cyberspace, and be a tremendous force in spreading the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

I asked some people who are very much up on the cyber-network, websites and so on, and I got quite a long list and I looked up all these websites, but I wasn't overly impressed—I'm sorry to say—because sometimes the artists would say, “Here I am, I'm an artist, I'm sitting in my studio and these are my paintings and I love Bahá'u'lláh so I make these paintings.” But they weren't very good paintings and also the site itself was not elegant. We had a speaker this morning saying that there is a necessity for elegance in everything we do. Even the simple presentation of the Tablet of Ahmad as we heard it today set to music would have a significant impact on the many thirsty souls wandering through cyberspace. It seems to me that countless websites could be developed by the use of that special new kind of intellect that the young people have along with their considerable organizational and artistic skills. Millions of people could be reached that way.

There is a young man in New Zealand who has what he calls the “Small Man Project” and it is quite clever. He is a lovely Bahá'í, very deepened; he is a trained artist and he makes small sculptures of men. They are only about as high as a thimble, two inches high, and they are all red. They are cast in plastic and he makes thousands of them, and they are grouped as three or four people standing and they are holding a banner and the banner says, “Look into the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran,” and then a website is given. He places these on park benches and on restaurant stools. It is not a public nuisance because they are so small. People sit down on the park bench and they see these three little red men and they read the banner and they go look up the website. He has had seven thousand hits: that is a lot. I know there are many others.

I was told of a young woman who has developed games that employ spiritual principles from the Bahá'í Teachings and whose site has had a wide response. Eventually, after such sites multiply, they would have to be considered and guidance would be needed. We could come together in conferences and share experience gained. Mistakes will be made. The House of Justice says we should not fear making mistakes; our teaching

approaches and our individual efforts to open a spiritual conversation with others can be experimental. This is a plea that I wanted to take this opportunity to make, especially to the young, because we have been called upon by the Universal House of Justice to make use of these great opportunities. Millions of souls are already having countless conversations in this new space, and what better way to reach them than with the whole force of the Creative Word and aesthetic excellence?

I want to leave you with a favorite passage of mine. Bahá'u'lláh says: "That which He hath reserved for Himself are the cities of men's hearts. And of these, the loved ones of Him Who is the Sovereign Truth are, in this Day, as the keys. Please God they may, one and all, be enabled to unlock, through the power of the Most Great Name, the gates of these cities" (*Gleanings* 241–42). Thank you.

NOTE

This lecture was presented at the 33rd Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá'í Studies–North America, 15 August 2009, Washington, District of Columbia, USA.

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