

Portals to Growth: Creating Capacity for Service
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Notes from a Talk by Sona Arbab
On Programs for the Spiritual Empowerment of Junior Youth

Bahá'í efforts related to the spiritual education of junior youth are not new. In the Bahá'í community of Iran, for example, fostering the spiritual development of “nowjavanan”—meaning those who have just become youth—has been a matter of concern for some time. Many other countries have also been engaged over the decades in nurturing these young members of their communities. Yet, many of the educational approaches adopted by various communities have followed the pattern of the classes for children and, even today, when it is recognized that those between the ages of 12 to 15 form a distinct group, the tendency to categorize them as children is strong.

During the 1970s when large-scale expansion of the faith was in full force in many countries, it was observed that junior youth as a population responded to the Faith with great enthusiasm and energy. The challenge lied, however, in learning how to nurture their immense capacities. Learning to meet this challenge has been an important aspect of the efforts of the Bahá'í community to achieve sustained growth among the masses of humanity.

Reflecting on the experience of large scale expansion, the Universal House of Justice pointed out in a message written in 1999 that

“Strategies to advance the process of entry by troops cannot ignore children and junior youth, if the victories won in one generation are not to be lost with the passage of time. It is imperative, then, that at this point in the process of systematization of the teaching work, definite steps be taken to ensure that the vision of the community fully embraces its young members.”

The receptivity of junior youth to the Faith, of course, has not been confined to the context of large-scale expansion. Looking anywhere around the world, we will find that many devoted and capable believers of today were attracted to the service of the Cause when they were junior youth. When appropriate attention is given to the needs of this age group over an extended period of time, the majority will grow up to be among the most valuable human resources of the Bahá'í community. So, if children are seeds that flourish and develop the capacity to serve the Faith in ten to fifteen years time, junior youth are seeds that bring forth the same fruits after two or three years attention, even when proper care and nurturing have been lacking at an earlier age.

It is interesting to note that the response of this younger generation to Bahá'í and Bahá'í-inspired educational programs has also been overwhelmingly positive. It was this response that prompted the Office of Social and Economic Development in 2002, after following and analyzing the results of a few pilot projects over a number of years, to decide to promote throughout the Bahá'í world programs for the spiritual empowerment of junior youth and to propagate approaches that have proven to be successful in one or more countries.

Parallel to this, training institutes everywhere have been facing the challenge of responding adequately to the enthusiasm of this age group. In some countries, junior youth were invited to study the main sequence of courses offered by their institutes. In other countries they were included in the activities for children without any consideration for the requirements of their age. In the former case, it was observed that, although there were exceptions, junior youth have not yet acquired sufficient life experience that would allow them to explore the many implications of the material presented in the courses of the main sequence and to take full responsibility for carrying out the acts of service it requires. In the latter case, it was found that they become dissatisfied by a content and methodology that does not take into account their stage of development. For these reasons, in the last few years, a growing number of training institutes have added another dimension to their function of developing human resources for the Faith by fostering

programs that enhance the capabilities of junior youth, benefiting from the materials and methods that are gradually being developed for the “junior youth spiritual empowerment” programs promoted by the Office of Social and Economic Development.

What I would like to share with you today are some broad features of this worldwide endeavor. But first, let me say a few words about some of the perceptions regarding adolescence that are prevalent today:

Adolescence as a stage in human life is characterized by sudden and rapid changes. These changes are not merely physical, but more fundamentally emotional, intellectual and behavioral. It is important to note that these changes do not occur in a vacuum. Environment, culture, upbringing, and relationships contribute to the nature and direction of these changes, influencing young people to think, act and behave in certain ways.

The physical and emotional changes that a person experiences during this stage of growth are interrelated. While there is excitement in the emergence of new physical powers, there is also awkwardness, sensitivity and feelings of anxiety. These emotions may create contradictions in one’s behavior. One may seem shy, yet at times quite sociable. One may express the desire to be left alone, and at the same time welcome attention. One may have incredible courage in some things and be rather fearful in others. During this time, a new level of self-awareness manifests itself in relationships with peers and adults. The ways others see one’s appearance, react to one’s ideas, and respect one’s identity take on special importance. All of these characteristics lead to a vulnerability that can be exploited for good or for bad. For example, we can see how propaganda and advertising that are increasingly shaping values and attitudes of young people take advantage of this vulnerability. The materialistic forces and ideologies behind most propaganda distort reality. The images, for instance, that are projected of a perfect and mostly unattainable appearance play on the youngsters’ emotions and rising self-awareness. The main occupation of girls is portrayed as that of attracting men. The tendency in many cultures to define manhood purely in terms of physical power is exaggerated. Weakness is

shunned and aggressive behavior is propagated. Interestingly, a special brand of toughness is projected more and more to be adopted by girls.

Unfortunately, some of the prevailing theories, also materialistic at their core, do little to remove the wrong perceptions that abound in society of the nature and characteristics of junior youth. That this is a very difficult age, one of rebelliousness, irrationality and frivolity is somehow accepted by parents and teachers alike without looking to see whether the causes of such behavior, when it exists, are inherent to the stage of growth of the individual or are imposed by social environment.

In contrast to these widespread perceptions, the Bahá'í endeavors, some of the features of which I will describe here, would consider the negative characteristics of junior youth, so commonly talked about, not as inherent qualities but basically as the results of the environment. Even in today's society, when one looks across cultures, the kind of attributes that stand out as inherent to this period of life are enthusiasm, willingness to learn, sense of justice, and tendency towards altruism.

The following passage from Abdu'l-Baha addressed to the youth, offers us a vision of the kind of youth our programs must help the junior youth of today to become:

O loved ones of 'Abdu'l-Bahá!

Man's life has its springtime and is endowed with marvelous glory. The period of youth is characterized by strength and vigor and stands out as the choicest time in human life. Therefore you should strive day and night so that endowed with heavenly strength, inspired with brilliant motives and aided by His celestial power and heavenly grace and confirmation, you may become the ornaments of the world of humanity, and preeminent among those who are initiated into true learning and the love of God. You must be distinguished amidst men by your sanctity and detachment, loftiness of purpose, magnanimity, determination, noble mindedness, tenacity, the elevation of your aims and your spiritual qualities; that you may become the means of exaltation and glory for the Cause of God and the dawning

places of His heavenly bestowals; that you may conduct yourselves in conformity with the counsels and exhortations of the Blessed Beauty—may my life be offered up for His loved ones—and by reflecting Bahá'í qualities and attributes, you may stand out distinguished from others. 'Abdu'l-Bahá eagerly anticipates that each one of you may become even as a fearless lion moving in the pastures of human perfection and a musk-laden breeze wafting over the meads of virtue.

There are many passages in the writings that describe the attributes of Bahá'í youth. As we reflect on them, we may readily conclude that our programs for the junior youth, who are the youth of tomorrow, need to assist them to adopt lofty aims, be inspired by noble thoughts, and develop qualities and abilities that a life of service to the Cause and to humanity will require of them.

To further our understanding of the significance of adolescence, we should remember that, while some societies today tend to prolong childhood, Bahá'u'lláh designates the age of 15 as the beginning of maturity, when laws such as obligatory prayer and fasting become binding. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes reaching the age of maturity in these words:

The suckling babe passeth through various physical stages, growing and developing at every stage, until its body reacheth the age of maturity. Having arrived at this stage it acquireth the capacity to manifest spiritual and intellectual perfections. The lights of comprehension, intelligence and knowledge become perceptible in it and the powers of its soul unfold.

Every individual needs to receive the kind of education and nurturing in the years immediately before the age of fifteen that will allow these perfections to appear at that age, especially because, by that time, many of the patterns of thought and behavior that will direct the life of a person have been fixed. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá has stated:

It is extremely difficult to teach the individual and refine his character once puberty is passed. By then, as experience hath shown, even if every effort be exerted to

modify some tendency of his, it all availeth nothing. He may, perhaps, improve somewhat today; but let a few days pass and he forgetteth, and turneth backward to his habitual condition and accustomed ways.

It is during the few years before we reach the age of 15 that fundamental concepts about individual and collective life are formulated in our minds. We begin to question much of what we have been previously taught and become aware of the contradictions that surround us. We are not as willing as before to follow automatically the standards set by adults. During this time of transition, one is ever seeking answers to questions, often very philosophical ones. Among these, questions having to do with one's identity are of special importance, for this is an age during which a new consciousness rapidly emerges. There are passages in the writings that refer to this stage of transition in the life of the human being. For example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that:

After a time he enters the period of youth in which his former conditions and needs are superseded by new requirements applicable to the advance in his degree. His faculties of observation are broadened and deepened, his intelligent capacities are trained and awakened, the limitations and environment of childhood no longer restrict his energies and accomplishments.

And regarding the search for true identity, the Guradian writes:

More and more people from all strata of society frantically seek their true identity, which is to say, although they would not so plainly admit it, the spiritual meaning of their lives; prominent among these seekers are the young.

As they try to address the many questions occupying the minds of junior youth, our programs will have to be aware that youth of this age do have a good deal to say, and whoever treats them as children misses the opportunity to win their trust, and help them form a proper identity. This proper identity, of course, is not one that is centered on self and its fulfillment, but one that will lead to the station of selfless service. Moreover, we

must remember that in many parts of the world, junior youth have firsthand experience with life's hardships and are shouldering heavy responsibilities. This has granted them a special measure of maturity.

“O thou whose years are few, yet whose mental gifts are many,” says Abdu'l-Baha. **“How many a child, though young in years, is yet mature and sound in judgement! How many an aged person is ignorant and confused! For growth and development depend on one's powers of intellect and reason, not on one's age or length of days.”**

What I have mentioned briefly represents the kinds of thought that are shaping the efforts of training institutes around the world to attend to some of the educational needs of the junior youth. The generic name given to the programs that are gradually evolving is “The Spiritual Empowerment of Junior Youth”. In almost all cases, the program is organized around the concept of a junior youth group, which has some of the elements of a study circle but has its own distinct features. These junior youth groups are created out of the conviction that youth of this age need an environment that gives them support, an environment in which their thoughts and views are respected. As it must be clear from what I have mentioned, the so-called “identity crisis” attributed to the stage of adolescence is not a necessary condition through which every young person must pass. It is partly the outcome of the glaring contradictions that young awaking minds discover in the life of adults whom they had completely trusted before. It is also a result of the inability of adults to recognize the rationality of an individual who is trying to leave childhood behind.

Many of us will remember the extent to which we engaged in meaningful conversation with our peers during our own adolescence, how much importance we placed on their opinions, and how reassuring was the sense of belonging to a group of friends. The junior youth groups organized by training institutes are trying to satisfy these legitimate needs.

When training institutes begin to establish a special program for junior youth, the groups are initially composed of youth of various ages. As the program continues year after year

in the same locality, gradually three levels appear, roughly corresponding to the ages of 12, 13, and 14, through which junior youth progressively advance. The goal is to accompany them for three continuous years until at the age of fifteen, they can enter the study of the main sequence of courses the institutes offer.

As far as I know, no training institute has yet developed a full program that will engage the interest and channel the energies of this young population for three years. Agencies that are striving to develop materials are aware that if educational content and activities challenge young people adequately, they have the necessary intellectual powers to comprehend profound themes, formulate questions, and reflect on themes of great moral and spiritual significance. They realize that if the animator of the group is able to create an environment of love, respect and support, it will be easy for the program to help the participants gain knowledge of their true selves and find answers to searching questions. It will not be difficult to foster in them their true identity—their spiritual identity—and to introduce them to those concepts that will create in their minds and hearts the moral structures of a Bahá'í youth they will soon become. Based on this understanding, several organizations have produced a few Bahá'í inspired textbooks to be studied by junior youth in groups, with the help of animators. Most national programs that I am familiar with are using three available books—*Breezes of Confirmation*, *Walking the Straight Path*, and *Drawing on the Power of the Word*. These books are supplemented by other materials being developed locally. Most communities are also trying to offer Bahá'í classes to junior youth as the continuation of their children's classes directly on Bahá'í subjects.

What is being envisioned is that the Bahá'í inspired materials for all three levels would be concerned with the development of two types of capabilities. The first are those that enhance the power of expression. The second are capabilities that help the youth recognize the moral issues underlying everyday decisions and identify the moral implications of speech and action.

That enhancing the power of expression should have been chosen as a central concern of a program for the spiritual empowerment of junior youth may be in need of some explanation. The origin, of course, is belief in the Generating Power of the Word of God, which nurtures the powers of human utterance and understanding. As Bahá'u'lláh states:

The Day-Star of utterance, shining resplendent from the dayspring of divine Revelation, hath so illumined the Scrolls and Tablets that the kingdom of utterance and the exalted dominion of understanding vibrate with joy and ecstasy and shine forth with the splendour of His light.

In a world where youth are increasingly left without any moral guidance, where the distinction between right and wrong is being lost, and the standard of moral behavior is being reduced to “that which pleases me”, only the power of the Word of God can regenerate the spiritual senses. It is the Word of God that, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us illumines the realm of thought and morals. “**...in the spiritual realm of intelligence and idealism,**” He says, “**there must be a center of illumination, and that center is the everlasting, ever-shining Sun, the Word of God. Its lights are the lights of reality which have shone upon humanity, illumining the realm of thought and morals, conferring the bounties of the divine world upon man.**”

The material being developed for junior youth spiritual empowerment programs is based on the understanding that many statements in the writings like the ones I have quoted point to certain fundamental relationships among four essential concepts: spiritual empowerment, power of expression, thought, and moral structure. That is why to develop capabilities related to the power of expression, under the influence of the Word of God, is such a central concern of all this material. This is briefly how the connections are seen:

God has endowed the human being with the powers of thought and utterance. However, there is an intimate connection between language and thought. Utterance reveals the power of thought and understanding. But at the same time, our understanding of reality is shaped by and evolves within the context of words. Thus developing the power of

expression and fostering understanding of reality go hand in hand. One's consciousness is raised as one develops the power of expression. If youth are to walk the path of spiritual growth and be empowered to serve humanity, they need the language that would allow them to reflect, to analyze and to apply.

Moreover, the junior youth who are to enter this path consciously need to learn the concepts that generate the central themes of a spiritual life and raise their consciousness to new levels. To be able to make moral choices, one needs more than a set of rules; an entire moral structure has to be built in the mind of a young person with a strong social purpose that connects spiritual concepts, patterns of behavior, and the knowledge of consequences—a structure that stands up by the forces of volition and courage. Such a moral structure, it is believed, is intimately connected with the structure of language that is to operate in the mind of the individual. This language should be rich enough to enable the youth to understand the powerful social, cultural, and ideological forces that are shaping people's thoughts and values, and the spiritual forces that are needed to transform these values.

The three books I have mentioned contain lessons that aim at the development of the power of expression. But language could be taught with a variety of contents including ones that are spiritually damaging or at best neutral. Moral concepts could also be presented as a series of virtues, obligations, rules and facts, without the elements of language and thought that enhance spiritual perception and help build moral structure. Lessons could also be designed simply to improve behavior without the aim of drawing a deep commitment to social transformation. The content of the books, then, has been carefully developed to demonstrate the application of spiritual concepts and social principles to the lives of young people. The main theme of "Breezes of Confirmation", for example, is that of making an effort and receiving God's confirmation—only one of the many themes on which young people need to reflect in order to be empowered to contribute to the betterment of their communities, as well as to develop sound moral reasoning and spiritual perception. Two of the lessons of "Drawing on the Power of the Word", to take another example, are dedicated to the discussion of the effects of

propaganda and advertising on thought and behavior, in order to raise the youth's social consciousness to a state where they can question and analyze the forces that are influencing their lives.

A characteristic of this material and, we can hope others that will be developed, is that while open and explorative, they avoid being relativistic and do not shy away from providing standards of behavior. It also seems important that the material present situations that are close to the reality of junior youth. This does not mean, however, that we need to focus on the manifestations of the lower nature of the human being in the name of reality. A mode of thought and behavior can be created that does not necessarily represent how most of the youth think and behave today, but is nevertheless accessible to them and can inspire them to strive for higher levels of excellence. To do so, it seems essential that paternalism, childish chatter, and the language of sermons on good behavior be avoided.

The Bahá'í-inspired texts that are being developed have to be complemented, of course, with specifically Bahá'í educational materials for junior youth so that they could continue their study of the Faith. These too would not limit themselves to imparting the knowledge of Principles and Teachings, though this would be one of their essential components. The challenge would continue to be to assist youth to develop spiritual perception, understand the implication of the teachings within their social environment and to develop a strong sense of purpose that can be channeled towards service to the community.

I should mention here, that the study of the content of any material such as the ones I have briefly described consumes only a portion of the time of a junior youth group that meets regularly. The House of Justice in its Ridvan message of 2000 points out that **“Creative attention must be devoted to involving them in programs of activity that will engage their interests, mold their capacities, and involve them in social interaction with older youth.”** Institutes around the world are trying to devise dramatic, artistic and service activities to assist the junior youth to use their powers of expression and to make positive contribution to their communities. Special events in which the

junior youth from an entire region or cluster come together to make dramatic presentations, sing, recite poetry, and give talks are arranged once or twice a year by some training institutes. Other events include ecological camps in which passages from the Writings about the environment are read, an appreciation of nature is fostered, and activities such as planting trees are carried out.

What has been observed through these efforts is that junior youth are quite willing to join with the constructive forces of society, and give selflessly of their time and energy to noble causes. Indeed, these are the years in which the future defenders of the environment, the builders' of peace, the champions of justice, the selfless educators of humankind are formed, capable of showing exemplary courage in standing up for their newly found ideals. If nurtured properly, they can rise to the challenge that Shoghi Effendi presents to the youth in this passage:

“He urges you to make up your minds to do great, great deeds for the Faith; the condition of the world is steadily growing worse, and your generation must provide the saints, heroes, martyrs and administrators of future years. With dedication and will power you can rise to great heights!”

As already mentioned, animators of junior youth groups have an essential role to play in the programs I am describing here, and success depends on training an ever growing number of them. It is envisioned that, in time, out of the experience of training institutes will evolve a series of specialized courses dedicated to the training of the animators of junior youth groups that will branch off from the main sequence at some point. Although not a prerequisite, it is well established that youth are in an excellent position to perform this act of service. They seem to find it easy to treat the junior youth as equals and not as children, to create an environment in which they can ask their questions, express their doubts, and engage in the investigation of reality.

The Office of Social and Economic Development, as it follows the development of the program in various countries, has observed that in clusters where the development of

human resources are well underway, the capacity to form and sustain junior youth groups can be easily created. In a few countries, it has been possible to reach several hundred junior youth in two or three advanced clusters very quickly. The institutions are learning how to coordinate the efforts within such clusters, how to work with the same junior youth for some three years until they engage in the study of the first course in the main sequence of the courses offered by the institute, how to assist and develop the capacity of the animators of junior youth groups, and how to expand the program both numerically and geographically. In some countries work among indigenous populations is bringing heartwarming results. In these populations, one can even have the hope of developing the capacity to reach almost all the junior youth in a given year. The worldwide efforts of the Bahá'í community towards the spiritual empowerment of the junior youth are gaining momentum. We are clearly only beginning and much has to be learned. But even at this early stage the Universal House of Justice has said in the Ridvan message of this year that **“initial efforts for the spiritual empowerment of the junior youth are meeting with success.”**

Finally, I would like to mention that training institutes are not the only agencies that are trying to implement programs for junior youth. In fact in your own country promising initiatives have begun, about which you will hear shortly. In a number of countries, the friends are offering the available materials to schools and are trying to introduce them to the appropriate government agencies, and there is much receptivity. An increasing number of Bahá'í inspired organizations are incorporating the materials into their programs and there is every indication that these are influencing the lives of the participants. I would like to close by sharing with you the comments of two junior youth about the effects of studying several textbooks particularly “Drawing on the Power of the Word” in one such program. I should mention that those who facilitate the various courses offered by the program that reaches about 3000 youth are mostly government teachers. The program was evaluated recently by a university student who wrote her thesis on the basis of her observations.

These are the comments of a young girl taken from a few interviews:

“Before I had almost no communication with my parents, but now, yes, I have the communication that I need, because I have learned a lot from studying these books...”

“[These books] have helped me a lot, because I have had problems in my home, and this has helped me to be able to solve them. I thought about solving them in my own way, but ...all this really helped me.

Sometimes...my father is really strict with me, in the sense that...he hits me. I wanted to leave, but they weren't going to give me permission just like that 'yes, go ahead.' They thought and thought about it. I thought... 'I shouldn't let my mind get wrapped up in negative things...

With all these problems with my father and everything, one day I was looking through the books we have [in the house], reading them, and I found—I found these texts again. So I began to read them, in part, *Drawing on the Power of the Word*, and I was finding so many things in there...In those years, I was thinking of trying to leave my home, but instead, I thought it was better to shut myself in my room and to begin reading these books, that this would benefit me more...

...I began to change a lot. Because before, I became so angry when they scolded me, I became so angry and I used to answer them badly, and of course they punished me. But all this began changing, with these books.”

The young girl goes on to say that at some point she decided to bring the material to the attention of her parents:

“...I called them and studied this with them, and they too have changed...I began to read the books to them, because they don't have the eyesight any more...they can't see the words. So only I can read, and...now they have already changed a lot too.”

Another junior youth, a young boy, pointing to a particular page in *Drawing on the Power of the Word*, said:

“...here it explains that one should be a person that others speak well of, who doesn't get in trouble, who helps others, a person who participates with the community. For me, it seems important that we should see each other as human beings, in order to help everyone....”

He went on then to explain that he, just like many others, had no interest in helping his community before he entered the program. He pointed to many passages from his textbooks that had influenced him in thinking differently. Among them: “Blessed and happy is he who ariseth to promote the best interests of the peoples and kindreds of the earth.”