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Tumbling through Turbulent Times

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“The ‘Summons of the Lord of Hosts’, ...has come as a propitious reminder of the dire consequences of ignoring His warnings against injustice, tyranny and corruption.”

The Universal House of Justice, Ridván 2002

ON DECEMBER 28, 2002 the main news item the radio was about the government securing the right to close off any area hit by a biological act of terrorism. In simple terms, should an area be hit by something highly contagious the police and the army would effectively close that area off and stop anyone entering or leaving, protecting everyone on the outside while those on the inside are sacrificed for the protection of the majority. It reminded me of the story of the village of Eyam in Derbyshire where during an outbreak of the plague in 1665 the villagers realised that the plague had reached their village. They decided to close the village off and sacrifice themselves in order to prevent the plague spreading to their neighbours. Today it is possible to visit the village, view the graves of those who died and read of their heroism and self-sacrifice. No doubt the villagers were sustained by their unquestioning religious faith.

It crossed my mind that the news, which had set my musings, may well have been sending shockwaves of panic among many people who were less inclined to self-sacrifice than their Eyam forebears. No surprise that the government chose to release this news at a time when those most vulnerable to the decision were locked in annual combat in the January sales. The Universal House of Justice had touched on the public's growing unease about the world situation since the September 11th event in New York when they said, “*The violent shocks being inflicted on the consciousness of people everywhere emphasize the urgency of the remedy He has prescribed.*”[1]

Among reactions to the confusions and challenges of the rapid changes that have happened in the last two hundred years two seem to be particularly damaging. One is to find the whole thing so confusing that apathy sets in, as people feel powerless to intervene in the confusing changes that affect their lives. The other reaction is to become violent against change and yearn for an imagined golden age of the past. In trying to understand the change myself I have concluded confusion arises because interrelated spheres of change that affect our lives have very different and sometimes conflicting patterns of development.

In the first instance it is difficult to appreciate the level of change mankind has experienced in the last two hundred years. If man started as an amoeba in the primeval swamp then it was a very long time before he emerged from the ocean and explored the land. A similarly long time elapsed before he was standing upright and making tools. How long passed before fire and the wheel made his lot easier. The gradual change from hunter/gatherer to farmer and the consequent evolution through tribe, city, and nation state took many thousands of years. During most of this time the basic changes to daily life were minimal. A peasant farmer or craftsman could be transported backwards and forwards by a thousand

years or more and feel quite at home with how life was lived. Then, at the end of the eighteenth century, the first sparks of technological change took place and kick-started the industrial revolution. This, in turn, heralded unprecedented change in how we live, at a speed unparalleled in human history. Imagine a peasant farmer of 1700 being taken back in time to 1400. Not much to get excited about there. Then imagine the same farmer moved forward to 2000. Nothing would make sense and the world would be a frightening place. It

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is no surprise then, that as a species we have found it difficult to assimilate these changes without disruption to our psyche.

However, it is important to understand that all change is not exponential as it has been with technology. Because technological growth is so dominant as a standard by which societies are now measured we are lulled into the false notion that all change follows its pattern. There are many important aspects of life that do not follow this pattern. Take human creativity for example. Human creativity does not change in a growth pattern. We are no more or less creative than our forebears or future generations. Mozart is not better or worse than Elgar, Leonardo da Vinci is similarly not more or less important than Pablo Picasso. The development of creativity is “continual difference”. Similarly the human potential for sacrifice is a constant. The villagers of Eyam were no more or less brave and self-sacrificing than the firemen of New York on September 11th.

Morals on the other hand neither improve exponentially like technology nor happen as random expressions of the human spirit. Morals are seasonal and there are times in history and places in the world where morals have sunk into devastating decline. It could be argued that where societies are most closely aligned to true religious adherence or traditional lore, moral values have a more powerful influence on daily action.

Political change has, to some degree, reflected technical change. The basic structure of politics remained largely unchanged in substance for thousands of years. An elite in one form or another ruled all societies. The revolution in politics came on the heels of the revolution in technology and has been subject to experimentation. The present model, although admired and encouraged in its infancy by Bahá'u'lláh is not the finished article any more than the Model T Ford was meant to be all there was to the development of the motorcar. In the context of the tens of thousands of years of “civilisation” the past one hundred and fifty years of extending the franchise to vote in some, but not, by any means, all of the countries of the world is the beginning of a process that will develop, eventually influenced by the growing importance of the Bahá'í teachings, in ways quite beyond our imagination.

That the world is in turmoil is not in doubt. The Universal House of Justice, in their Ridván message of 2003 have remarked, “*The sorrows, fears and perplexities evoked by this latest conflict (the war in Iraq) in the unfoldment of and outrage at the recurrent crises agitating the planet.*”[2] However, we cannot say that we were not warned. Bahá'u'lláh stated, “Thus have We created the whole earth anew in this day, yet most of the people have failed to perceive it.”[3] The coming of Bahá'u'lláh, the development of democracy and technology are undoubtedly connected. The two processes of political change and technological development began in earnest at the time of Bahá'u'lláh. The growth of technology preceded change in politics and possibly the moral dilemmas thrown up by new technology led to the need for a new political model.

At first technological change was accompanied by wide scale exploitation. The poor had, at first, no means of successful protest without the assistance of those with power and a conscience. Once the voice of the “morally” empowered, religious aristocrats and industrialists, was raised the disenfranchised working classes felt able to band together in unity and form trade unions. Thus, by the end of the nineteenth century education for all had been established as an idea and the workplace was subject to a whole battery of protective laws. At this time Bahá'u'lláh said to Queen Victoria,

“We have also heard that thou hast entrusted the reins of counsel into the hands of the representatives of the people. Thou, indeed, hast done well, for thereby the foundations of the edifice of thine affairs will be strengthened, and the hearts of all that are beneath thy shadow, whether high or low, will be tranquillised.”[4]

If ever hearts needed tranquillising it must be now. Bahá'u'lláh seems to imply that good government is what the world needs. However, in the same tablet He goes on to warn those in government,

“O ye the elected representatives of the people in every land! Take ye counsel together, and let your concern be only for that which profiteth mankind and bettereth the condition thereof.”[5]

Politicians take note! The buzzword for all this monumental change in the nineteenth century must have been “reform” and its heroes were reformers. Pertinent to the mood of the time Bahá’u’lláh spoke of himself as “the World Reformer” and talked of those who failed to see the potential of His influence on the world as, “*a young child who can distinguish neither the mischief-maker from the reformer nor the wicked from the righteous.*”[6]

As the distressing images of the war in Iraq unfolded on our television screens and the public struggled to understand the processes involved and ultimate purpose the Universal House of Justice reassured Bahá’ís in its Ridván message that until Bahá’u’lláh’s message is heeded such events are unavoidable. “In the resultant conflict, involving so conspicuously the countries in which the earliest history of the Cause took shape, we see a fresh reminder of Bahá’u’lláh’s warning that the ‘*world’s equilibrium hath been upset through the vibrating influence of this most great, this new World Order*’. That the events of this crisis directly affect a territory with as rich a Bahá’í legacy as Iraq is particularly noteworthy.”[7] Bahá’u’lláh counselled the kings and rulers of His time against robbing their subjects “*to rear palaces*” for themselves. He continued poignantly, “*Your people are your treasures.*”[8]

We can be fooled into thinking, because of its pre-eminence in the media, that the movement of political power from undemocratic elites to an enfranchised population is the most significant change in human society in this age. A change as far reaching, perhaps, as the change from hunter/gatherer to farmer. However, Bahá’u’lláh is the author of a far more fundamental change that will ultimately have a deeper impact on the life of every person on the planet. That change is the wresting of spiritual authority from a priestly class and creating a spiritual order in which every person can participate. In His Tablet to the Pope Bahá’u’lláh reminded him of the promise made by Jesus that, “*When He, the Spirit of Truth, is come, He will guide you into all truth.*”[9] It would seem plausible that the “truth” to which Jesus was alluding and which would have been completely incomprehensible to His disciples was the “world order of Bahá’u’lláh” integral to which is the Nineteen Day Feast and the Local Spiritual Assembly.

Bahá’ís are not immune from familiarity breeding contempt and it is often difficult to keep in our vision the purpose and potential of the Nineteen Day Feast and the Local Spiritual Assembly. In writing to the kings and rulers Bahá’u’lláh outlined the fundamental prerequisites for those who rule: “*Courtesy is, in truth, a raiment which fitteth all men.*”[10] “*Know of a truth that your subjects are God’s trust amongst you. Watch ye, therefore, over them as ye watch over your own selves.*”[11] “*They who exhort others unto justice, while themselves committing iniquity, stand accused of falsehood.*”[12]

In studying Bahá’u’lláh’s *Summons of the Lord of Hosts* we are able to understand how He has laid the foundations for good spiritual and temporal leadership and how ignoring His advice is still the root cause of the world’s problems. We must be confident that the world we are creating in which the elected spiritual leadership is imbued with courtesy, sincerity and concern, and which is accessible to every member, is a model that will ultimately enable mankind to finally come to terms with the turmoil of the last two centuries.

Kevin Beint

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- 1 Universal House of Justice, Ridván Message, 2002
 - 2 Universal House of Justice, Ridván Message, 2003
 - 3 Bahá’u’lláh, *Summons of the Lord of Hosts*, p. 25
 - 4 *Summons* p. 90
 - 5 *Summons* p. 90
 - 6 *Summons* p.92
 - 7 Universal House of Justice, Ridván Message, 2003
 - 8 *Summons* p. 93
 - 9 *Summons* p. 191
 - 10 *Summons* p. 72
 - 11 *Summons* p. 75
 - 12 *Summons* p. 78

