

Thornton Chase Memorial Talk - Notes
September 25, 2016

Dear Friends,

I'm delighted to be here to commemorate the first American Baha'i. The last time I had the pleasure to look out to this beautiful audience was when our late Barbara West asked me to speak here some 13 years ago. I can only imagine that her soul is soaring in the Abha Kingdom and has many things to recount about this plane of existence such as travel teaching with me across Siberia in her 70's striving to keep up with all the 20 year olds! Last time I was asked to speak on a single subject but since time has passed the committee may have thought, let's make this a bit more challenging so I decided to pose a question to you at the start of this talk.

What do Thornton Chase, Tablets of the Divine Plan, Huququ'llah and Social Change have in common?

Let's find out.

For all who have come from near and far to the resting place of Thornton Chase is a form of pilgrimage as Abdu'l-Baha, Center of the Covenant, Himself visited this site and asked that we pay our respects each year.

We know that Thornton Chase was given the title "Firm" or "Steadfast" which he demonstrated throughout his life as he sacrificed his material wealth, his time and energy for the Cause of God. **Shoghi Effendi states, "Steadfastness is a treasure that makes a man so rich as to have no need of the world or any person or anything that is therein. Constancy is a special joy, that leads us mortals on to lofty heights, great progress, and the winning of the perfections of Heaven. All praise be to the Beloved's holy court, for granting this most wondrous grace to His faithful people, and to His favored ones, this best of gifts."**

(Shoghi Effendi, Bahíyyih Khanum, p. 148)

This is a special day and also a special year because it is the 100th anniversary of the Tablets of the Divine Plan. As many of you know, the *Tablets of the Divine Plan* refers to 14 letters ([tablets](#)) written between March 26, 1916 and March 8, 1917

by `Abdu'l-Bahá to [Bahá'ís](#) in the [United States](#) and [Canada](#). These letters inspired many souls to spread far and wide to share the New Revelation from Baha'u'llah, the founder of the Baha'i Faith, whose teachings are to bring about the unification of the planet through many principles which I do not have time to elaborate on but some include the oneness of God, the Unknowable Essence, the oneness of all religions and humanity. Baha'u'llah's mission was not to add another religion to the various existing religions – it was not to start a new world congregation – but to bring teachings and divine laws for the spiritual transformation of humanity that will ensure lasting change for centuries to come.

We all know that such **lofty goals are not won through prayers and steadfastness without action**. All around the world, Baha'is engaged in a global plan of action that has its roots in the Tablets of the Divine Plan, then furthered by the Guardian Shoghi Effendi, and now guided by the Universal House of Justice. In small regions geographic areas, usually a collective of several cities, called a cluster, Baha'is and their friends are building the foundation for a new society where devotional gathering bring people of all religious backgrounds together to pray to one God building peace at the grassroots, children's classes lay the foundation for global citizenship, junior youth groups that put youth and social action in the forefront of social change, and the global system of the training institute which raises human capacity to provide a constant source of change makers in the community.

For this 100th anniversary of the Tablets of the Divine Plan, the Universal House of Justice, wrote on March 26, 2016, to the Baha'is of the United States and Canada:

“The movement of your clusters to the farthest frontiers of learning will usher in the time anticipated by Shoghi Effendi at the start of your collective exertions, when the communities you build will directly combat and eventually eradicate the forces of corruption, of moral laxity, and of ingrained prejudice eating away at the vitals of society.”

(26 March 2016, To the chosen recipients of Abdu'l-Baha's Tablets of the Divine Plan, the Baha'is of the United States and the Baha'is of Canada).

These three forces of injustice are addressed by the Guardian, Shoghi Effendi, in the book Advent of Divine Justice where he describes three spiritual requisites that the American Baha'is must achieve if we are to lead the world spiritually. They are: **rectitude of conduct, chaste and holy life, and racial unity**.

In the quote I just read, the House of Justice mentions **“forces of corruption”** and we see how our electoral system is run on special interest money for campaigning and how divisive in its approach. The House mentions **“moral laxity”**, how often do we see business decisions made through lack of honesty for the short term interest of the rich sacrificing people, animals and the environment. Our **moral laxity is seen in so many ways and is ingrained in our culture. For example, the objectification of women to sell products** and push consumerism has become a cultural norm. And **“ingrained prejudice” racism manifests its ugly face in police brutality, mass incarceration of people of color, school to prison pipeline and inequality of education.** When I worked at a research center at UCLA some years ago, I’d travel to various schools and see first-hand the inequality of education in schools through lack of resources, low expectations of students of color, prejudice in school administration and impoverished communities characterized by food deserts.

From a Baha’i perspective, corruption and **poverty have its roots in a spiritually bankrupt system** not only on our shores but all over the world. We witness NGOs, churches, businesses and even individuals of good will giving charity to alleviate the worst forms of poverty. Are they succeeding? For many reasons, including corruption, creating dependency, and top-down approaches they are not. A World Economic Forum report states:

“While 1% of the population owns 48% of the world's wealth, a majority of the remainder follows the same trend. Of the remaining 52% of global wealth, 46% is owned by the rest of the richest fifth of the world's population”. (Retrieved from: <http://www.cnn.com/2015/01/19/world/wealth-inequality/>)

A new administrative system revealed by Baha’u’llah, and economic systems with **aspects such as the Huququ’llah** (Arabic for the Right of God) that fundamentally redistributes wealth based on the spiritual practice of asking oneself what are my needs and wants? Baha’is over the world, “purify” their excess wealth – meaning after they account for all the expenses they have whatever they categorize as excess wealth (that is between them and God), then give 19% of that excess wealth to the Huququ’llah which goes towards various programs to build human capacity. What will the future of humanity look like if we are awakened to the

beauty of this spiritual law? While there will always be those who have more than others, we would alleviate extremes of wealth and poverty.

The Universal House of Justice writes on March 26, 2016: **“The Divine Plan continues at the present time with the intensive effort to establish a pattern of community life that can embrace thousands upon thousands in clusters that cover the face of the planet. Let every Baha'i appreciate, more deeply than ever before, that the provisions of the next stage of the Divine Plan set forth in our recent message to the Counsellors' Conference comprise the challenging requirements of the present hour—requirements both urgent and sacred, which, when sacrificially and persistently addressed, may hasten "the advent of that Golden Age which must witness the proclamation of the Most Great Peace...”** (the Baha'is of the world acting under the Mandate of 'Abdu'l-Baha, 26 March 2016).

Friends, we can see signs of social change through the Plans we are engaged in. In the book entitled, *Eleven*, by Paul Hanley, he describes that in... The **Indian state of Bihar is said to be the place where Gautama Buddha achieved enlightenment** and a place where people earn only \$1.25 US dollars a day. “Today, thousands of people in Bihar are engaged in a comprehensive community development program that aims to actualize the enlightened society envisioned by Buddha 2500 years ago.”

The Regional Training Institute of Bihar, modeled on the Ruhi Institute, reported that in 2012, 6,000 people were engaged in the four core activities of the institute including devotional gatherings, study circles, children’s classes and junior youth groups.

The Bihar institute’s impact has been remarkable especially the town of Bihar Sharif. After a decade working with the model, substantive changes at the level of culture were apparent. **“While cultural strengths were being reinforced, longstanding prejudices were falling away and more inclusive values taking hold. Significantly, the transformation was happening without political upheaval, violence, or even significant confrontation.”** Hanley reports, with thousands participating in the institute process, **“Participants from different castes are associating**, visiting each other’s homes, and sharing meals. **Some parents report they no longer tell their children what caste they belong to so they have no**

reason to feel either inferior or superior to others. Traditionally, **women** in the region are under the control of their husbands and cannot leave the house or participate in community affairs. The institute process emphasizes the equality of women and men and education, which has led to **girls becoming more educated.**” Parents are even **allowing girls to be junior youth coordinators** and this now has become the norm. As education of girls is increasing, **child arranged marriages are decreasing. Commonly girls as young as 12 are married off in an arranged marriage and now “Some girls now delay marriage and choose a husband themselves.”** (Hanley, Eleven, p. 355).

Friends, **this is the kind of spiritual transformation that leads to a lasting social change.** Even at an individual level, I remember seeing the power of doing Ruhi Book 1, “Reflections on the Life of the Spirit”, with someone in the fashion industry. The course changed the way she communicated in the workplace and as she recounted how her refusal to engage in backbiting she changed her work environment and relationship with her boss.

The House of Justice states: **“You have written the story of the enfoldment of the Divine Plan on the scroll of its first century. Before you, beloved friends, lies stretched out the blank scroll of the future on which you and your spiritual descendants will inscribe fresh and lasting deeds of renunciation and heroism for the betterment of the world.”** (To the Baha'is of the world acting under the Mandate of 'Abdu'l-Baha, 26 March 2016).

Conclusion:

So what do what do Thornton Chase, Tablets of the Divine Plan, Huququ'llah and Social Change have in common?

For me, it's **Individual and Social Transformation!**

Thank you,
Chitra

Additional Quote...

“Take pride in the sacrifices and victories of so many devoted souls who arose in response to 'Abdu'l-Baha's call. With the same spirit of renunciation shown by your predecessors, cast away the idle fancies and distractions of a

world that has lost its way that you may consecrate yourselves in the next five years to the priceless opportunities and inescapable obligations of the latest stage of a spiritual enterprise on which the fate of humanity ultimately depends.”

(26 March 2016, To the chosen recipients of Abdu'l-Baha's Tablets of the Divine Plan, the Baha'is of the United States and the Baha'is of Canada).