

Bahá'í National Convention 2025

A Common Endeavor: Building America's Future

Transcript of a live broadcast offered by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States on April 26, 2025, at the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois

Opening Prayer (recited by National Spiritual Assembly member)

O Thou Who art the Lord of Lords! I testify that Thou art the Lord of all creation, and the Educator of all beings, visible and invisible. I bear witness that Thy power hath encompassed the entire universe, and that the hosts of the earth can never dismay Thee, nor can the dominion of all peoples and nations deter Thee from executing Thy purpose. I confess that Thou hast no desire except the regeneration of the whole world, and the establishment of the unity of its peoples, and the salvation of all them that dwell therein.

Reflect awhile, and consider how they who are the loved ones of God must conduct themselves, and to what heights they must soar. Beseech thou, at all times, thy Lord, the God of Mercy, to aid them to do what He willeth. He, verily, is the Most Powerful, the All-Glorious, the All-Knowing.

(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh)

I

Good afternoon, dear friends. We welcome our viewers to this special presentation, and we offer loving greetings from your National Spiritual Assembly. We are assembled at this year's Bahá'í National Convention in Wilmette, Illinois with delegates from across the country. We have come together in prayer and in a spirit of unity, for two purposes. The first is the election of the nine people who will serve as the members of the National Spiritual Assembly for the coming year. The delegates have already cast their ballots, and the results will be announced later today. The Convention is taking place in the Bahá'í House of Worship for North America, a building dedicated to the worship of God, the oneness of all the peoples of the world, and service to humanity. As with all Bahá'í elections, this one too has been free of partisanship, and each delegate has been free to vote according to his or her own private conscience. There have been no nominations, no canvassing and campaigning, and no electioneering on anyone's part. Those elected will exercise no personal authority nor enjoy any special rank or consideration as individuals. Theirs will be the duty to carefully deliberate on the requirements of the times and to do whatever they can to assist the Bahá'í community members, together with their many friends, to work for the betterment of society.

The second purpose of the Convention is to allow the delegates to share their thoughts and concerns, to make suggestions to the Assembly, and to consult together about how to build

communities that embody the values of the Bahá'í Faith. In these discussions certain issues stand out:

This gathering is taking place at a time of increasing turbulence in American society. Americans everywhere wonder how to build a nation that is truly just, free and peaceful. In spite of all that brings us together as a people, a lot continues to divide us.

The members of the Bahá'í Faith are certainly dismayed by these divisions, but we also view the current difficulties, here and around the world, with the eye of hope. We see them as symptoms of a great historical transition into a new era in humanity's collective history. These times are the culmination of thousands of years of social progress that have taken us from the stages of infancy, childhood and adolescence into the modern era. We are now moving through this period of adolescence, with all the struggle and upheaval that this implies, and together we need to learn to achieve our collective maturity as a human species, a maturity that is unprecedented in our experience. Whatever turmoil may lie in our immediate future, we feel confident that humanity will not only endure —humanity will prevail. But this will depend upon our ability to cast away outdated habits of thought and action and to learn new ways of being and doing that will allow us to create a society characterized by spiritual and material prosperity for all. This will be a process to which all members of society can contribute. We are all learning together and we should recognize that, while everyone has perspectives to share, nobody holds a monopoly on truth.

II

America was the first nation in history founded upon an idea – that all men are created equal. That they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. That among these rights are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Perhaps those who signed the Declaration of Independence could not fully grasp to what extent these words would ring down through the centuries and embody what came to be known as “The American Dream.” As revolutionary as these sentiments were at the time, few of them would have seriously thought that these words would apply to those who in that period of history were not considered as full human beings.

If this is the idea of America, then the story of America is of our struggle to live up to this noble goal – to embrace it and apply it to everyone in our society. The words of the Declaration have continued to prod our collective conscience. Over the course of two and a half centuries we have seen both remarkable steps forward and terrible setbacks, moments of great advances and times of catastrophe. We have seen the best and the worst of which human beings are capable. The best included the courage and tireless labor of countless souls moved to champion the cause of justice; the untold acts of devotion and love that sustain the vital bonds of community, family, and friendship; unwavering resilience and strength forged against some of the most grievous oppressions in human history; and acts of heroic sacrifice impelled by a

sincere love of country and its highest ideals. Americans have also seen breathtaking feats of innovation, not the least of which is the American nation itself; expressions of remarkable creativity in response to crisis and suffering; the fundamental goodness and decency that characterize the lives of America's people, and an ever-hopeful conviction in the possibility of a perfectible Union.

We are still a long way from fulfilling the dream. Yet the perspective of time shows that there is reason for faith in the potential of this nation to overcome any obstacles.

It is remarkable that Baha'u'llah, Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, singled out the United States for the special destiny to lead the nations of the world in the establishment of world peace, because of both material strength and spiritual leadership. Bahá'í Scriptures praise the ideals and material achievements of the American system of governance, but they are clear-eyed and uncompromising about the spiritual ills that have for so long plagued us. These include excessive materialism, moral laxity and deeply ingrained racial prejudice. America's potential to demonstrate the possibility of all people living together in peace and harmony will only be realized to the extent that our spiritual progress goes hand in hand with our material advancement.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the establishment of this national governing body, the National Spiritual Assembly. During the course of many generations we have seen at first hand the challenges of building inclusive and loving communities. We have shared in this work with countless other people who cherish the same goals. We are aware of the difficulties in overcoming certain habits of thought and behavior, and we realize that the road ahead will be long, thorny and tortuous. But we have also seen real progress in learning how to apply fundamental principles to the life of society, in communities everywhere in the country. This realization should prevent us from backing down; rather, it encourages us to go at this work with full energy and faith.

We Americans should not think of ourselves as apart from other peoples and nations. The tribulations now encompassing much of the world are the symptoms of humanity's failure to understand and embrace the concept "all my relations." The interrelated threats of climate change, gender discrimination, extreme wealth and poverty, unfair distribution of resources, and the like, all stem from this deficiency and can never be resolved if we do not awaken to the spiritual dimension of these challenges and our dependence upon each other. The world has contracted to a neighborhood, and it is important to appreciate that what we do in America impacts not only our own country, but also the entire planet. We should also never forget that the richness of our diversity, and our founding ideals of liberty and justice, attract the eyes of the world to us. They will be influenced by what we achieve, or fail to achieve, in this regard. It is not an exaggeration to say that the cause of world peace is linked to the work we must do right here in this country.

III

It is essential for us to understand the revolutionary forces now operating in the world, in virtually every sphere of human activity. Two essential processes are underway. One is destructive in nature, while the other is integrative. Both processes, each in its own way, serve to lead humanity towards its full maturity.

The destructive forces are clear everywhere. Time-honored institutions are increasingly paralyzed and powerless. Leaders at all levels find themselves unable to mend the fractures in society, or to heal the despair and apathy now taking hold in many quarters. Even such things as objective truth are being called into question, which leaves us with no shared sense of reality.

These forces, although they are devastating, are pointing out the faults in our current ways of thought and behavior, thus helping to clear away the barriers that block our progress. This opens space for the second process, integration, which draws people together and provides new opportunities for cooperation and collaboration. The world is now deeply connected, for example in the sphere of global commerce and communications, and a sense of our interdependence has emerged.

The challenge for all of us is how to align ourselves, individually and collectively, with the process of integration. We need to work together to create a society that embodies our highest aspirations and ideals. This will help lead to an era of universal peace. Such is the view that underlies every endeavor pursued by the Bahá'í community. But how can we do this?

To work for the common good requires us to recognize guiding spiritual principles that lie at the heart of our reality. The foundation is the recognition that there is a moral order to the universe. This idea has fallen out of fashion in some circles. But if there is no moral order, then every person and interest group works to gain the most for themselves, whatever the cost to others. Other guiding principles exist, but the first and most important is the oneness of humanity. We are all one species, one kindred, one family. Prejudices of any kind have no basis in reality. All of us, of whatever background or gender, deserve to be treated with dignity, to participate in the life of society, and to be given the opportunity to develop whatever talents we possess for our own progress and for the advancement of civilization.

IV

The teachings of the religions of the world are a great source of spiritual knowledge. Many people have rejected the concept of religion. The reasons for this are understandable. Religious fanaticism has been one of the greatest curses of history, and it continues to exercise pernicious effects everywhere. Yet Baha'u'llah challenges us to understand the nature of true religion. Religion is not in its essence a mere set of creeds, dogmas and rituals. It does not cling blindly to traditions, nor is it in contradiction to rational thought. It is not an excuse to

condemn or persecute others. In its highest form religion is a force for bringing people together for the common good.

Baha'u'llah's teachings offer a single transcendent theme -- that of oneness: that there is one God, that there is one human family, with all of us His children; and that religion in reality is one -- that humanity's religious history, in all its diversity, offers a single story of humanity's encounter with the Divine Source.

The essential spiritual principles of all the great religions, however variously expressed, are one. All foster a sense of transcendent meaning, all remind us of our nature as spiritual beings, and of the path that makes for a life well lived.

The spiritual history of humanity is a love story. It is the story of God's love for humanity and of the corresponding love inspired in the hearts of human beings. It is the story of the love that this engenders in their hearts for all of God's creation, and especially for our fellow human beings.

While the various religions speak to the mystical relationship between the divine and the individual, they also counsel us to recognize that fulfilling our own potential requires that we seek to serve others. They see the value and sacredness in every human being and urge us to love others as we would ourselves. They recognize that the inner condition of our hearts affects our acts, our relationships with others, and our impact in the world, whether for good or evil. We find in faith the inspiration and the inner assurance that empowers us to serve our neighbors, to work sacrificially for the common weal, to pursue knowledge and understanding, and to strive for a just and peaceful society.

At this time in history, when the interdependence of the world is so clear, when a universal set of values is greatly needed, these eternal principles gain even greater significance. Such values must not only shape the way in which individuals treat each other -- they must also shape the ways we conceive of community and operate society's institutions.

The Bahá'ís believe that the history of humanity is really the story of one vast process whose ultimate goal is the coming together of the entire human race. But this unity does not mean uniformity; rather it will be a unity in diversity: united in our essential values and aspirations, yet infinitely diverse in our cultural expressions.

We do not believe that the road forward will be an easy one. It will involve ceaseless work, sacrifice and struggle. To achieve it requires a world-embracing vision, one that inspires our consciousness and brings us together in solidarity with all people.

V

It is time to remember who we Americans aspire to be as a people. This moment beckons us to a renewed commitment to realize the ideal of *E Pluribus Unum*—out of many, one—the very aspiration upon which America was founded.

It is not enough simply to believe in our hearts that we are all equal. This awareness creates the moral imperative to act, and to view all aspects of our personal, social, and institutional lives through the lens of justice. It implies social innovations more profound than anything we have yet achieved. And it requires the participation of Americans of every race, creed and background, for only through such inclusive participation can we achieve unity.

It is one thing to protest injustices as they arise, but it is a far more profound challenge to create an effective framework for justice. Our efforts can only succeed when we learn to build relationships with each other based on sincere friendship, regard, and trust, which, in turn, can illuminate our institutions and communities.

An essential element of the process will be honest and truthful discourse about the road we have taken to where we are now. We must, for example, build the capacity to truly hear and acknowledge the voices of those who have directly suffered from the effects of racial prejudice. It is critical to understand our present reality, and how we got here, so that we can move forward. This capacity should manifest itself in our schools, the media, and other civic arenas, as well as in our work and personal relations. This should not end with words, but lead to meaningful, constructive action.

Significant efforts are already underway to learn how to create models of unity in neighborhoods and communities throughout the nation. Bahá'ís have been persistently engaged in such efforts for decades. Again, the aim is not unity in sameness—it is unity in diversity, recognizing that everyone has a part to play in contributing to the betterment of society, and that true prosperity, material and spiritual, will be available to us all to the degree that we live up to this standard of inclusiveness. We should discover what helps to make a difference, and why. We should share this learning throughout the country as a means of inspiring and assisting the work of others. There is nothing more persuasive than the force of example. Fundamental changes in social attitude will be achieved if men and women of good will can see others attempting successfully to give these ideals practical expression in individual and community life.

If we do this, we could soon find ourselves in the midst of a fundamental transformation. A new society will be based upon our much higher potential for collaboration, reciprocity and human progress. We all understand how members of a healthy family depend upon each other and provide mutual support in relationships built on trust. This is no less true for a healthy community, and for an entire nation.

Let us not lose this opportunity. Will we commit to the process of forming “a more perfect union”? Will we be guided by “the better angels of our nature” to choose the course of wisdom, of courage, and of unity? Can we become the “beloved community” that includes and uplifts all? Will we choose to truly become that “city upon a hill” to serve as an inspiration to all humanity?

VI

We cannot know what to do until we know what story we are a part of. If we accept that there is an arc to human history, a goal, then the question is where we go from here and how we get there.

Because we have not yet achieved a perfect society, we must approach efforts to progress forward with a willingness to learn. We must join hands to help each other to build the capacity to create the society we want to see. Together let us learn to apply the principle of oneness through practical engagement and experience.

The Bahá'í writings say:

"... peace must first be established among individuals, until it leadeth in the end to peace among nations. Wherefore, O ye Bahá'ís, strive ye with all your might to create, through the power of the Word of God, genuine love, spiritual communion and durable bonds among individuals. This is your task."

This means that social change begins at the grassroots, as friends, families and neighbors begin a process of creating relationships characterized by loving fellowship, service and a sense of common purpose. As we do this, we learn to embrace ever larger numbers of people until entire communities begin to advance together. Over time we increasingly demonstrate the power of unity, as communities emerge that embody unity and peace; communities where racism, otherness and prejudice have no part. These can serve as havens of hope for all people.

But by "havens" we do not mean hideouts. These are not places where we try to escape from the difficulties of life. Rather, they are sources of inspiration and strength that provide us with the resources we need to work together towards our common aspirations.

Such havens, large and small, cultivate environments in which children can be raised untainted by any form of racial, national, or religious prejudice.

They champion the full equality of women and men in the affairs of the community.

They provide programs of education, transformative in their effects, open to all, and encompassing both the material and spiritual aspects of life.

Such havens give birth to social action as a way to remedy the numerous ills afflicting humanity and to empower each person to help build a new world. Such people develop capacity to engage those around them, regardless of creed, culture, class, or ethnicity, in conversations about how to bring about spiritual and material well-being through systematic application of spiritual principles.

In their experience working in hundreds of neighborhoods throughout the country, the Bahá'ís and those working with us have seen the value of a non-partisan, non-divisive, consultative

approach to problem solving. The Bahá'í approach, we believe, demonstrates how we might build institutional capacity to govern in a spirit of service, to resolve conflicts, and to build unity, creating an electoral process which is an expression of peace, in contrast to the vitriol and even violence that often accompanies elections in the wider society.

Youth face particular challenges in these times. They are experiencing an epidemic of loneliness, anxiety and depression. Some observers do not have faith in the potential of young people to take mature and effective decisions. Others are dismissive, focusing on the challenges youth face without acting to foster their potential. Yet we have seen that when youth internalize the principle of oneness, they develop a longing to serve their society. They become inspired to make a difference not only in their neighborhood but in the wider society, in ways that are truly impactful. Transformative change becomes the work of their generation and the work of all generations to come.

VII

Today's media environment often projects the most extreme views. These voices play upon our fears and insecurities, to capture our attention and enlist us in support of this or that cause. This inevitably is presented as good versus evil: those who believe in higher values, against those who seek to destroy our way of life.

But we should not allow this tactic to blind us to the essential goodness of the people in this country. Most of us sincerely want the right things for ourselves and for everyone. We should not fall into the trap of thinking of some groups as our allies, and others as our enemies. Rather, we need to meet everyone on the grounds of good faith and of confidence in our ability to find common cause as we work together to build a brighter future.

These same negative forces can create, if we are not careful, a sense of impotence and helplessness in the face of staggering challenges. But we must not forget the irresistible power of truth, of love and of unity to create the world anew. Together let us work toward the prosperity of all, recognizing that the welfare of each of us is tied to the welfare of all of us.

Let us behave as loyal citizens who avoid extreme partisanship and the contest for worldly power. Instead, we can focus on transcending differences and harmonizing perspectives through a consultative approach to problem solving.

Let us emphasize qualities and attitudes—such as trustworthiness, cooperation, and forbearance—that are building blocks of a stable social order.

Let us champion rationality and science as essential for human progress.

Let us advocate tolerance and understanding, and with the inherent oneness of humanity uppermost in our minds, view everyone as a potential partner to collaborate with, and overcome historic distance or hostility between groups.

We can be conscious of the forces of materialism at work around us, with our eyes wide open to the many injustices that persist in the world. Yet we can be equally clear-sighted about the creative power of unity and humanity's capacity for altruism.

We can appreciate the essential purpose of religion to transform hearts and overcome distrust, and so, with confidence in what the future holds, we can labor to cultivate the conditions in which progress can occur. The work of change is the work of the heart.

We can share our beliefs liberally with each other, remaining respectful of the freedom of conscience of every soul, and never impose our own beliefs on anyone. And while we would not pretend to have discovered all the answers, we can be clear about what we have learned and what we still need to learn.

In nearly two and a half centuries we have seen a nation brought into being in reaction to the forces of tyranny; tried and tested in the blood of Civil War; defended on countless battlefields; and strengthened through the determination and sacrifices of unnumbered souls who risked their all in the name of equality and civil rights. Surely what we have achieved so far shows that, with God's help, there is no challenge beyond our capacity to address.

The story continues. We appeal to all who aspire to be practitioners of peace. Although keenly aware of the trials that we must face before we achieve our destination, if we act together we can be assured of ultimate victory.

We extend to everyone the hand of friendship, of common endeavor, of shared service, of collective learning, and advance as one.

Closing Prayer (Prayer for America recited by National Spiritual Assembly member)

O Thou kind Lord! This gathering is turning to Thee. These hearts are radiant with Thy love. These minds and spirits are exhilarated by the message of Thy glad-tidings. O God! Let this American democracy become glorious in spiritual degrees even as it has aspired to material degrees, and render this just government victorious. Confirm this revered nation to upraise the standard of the oneness of humanity, to promulgate the Most Great Peace, to become thereby most glorious and praiseworthy among all the nations of the world. O God! This American nation is worthy of Thy favors and is deserving of Thy mercy. Make it precious and near to Thee through Thy bounty and bestowal.

—'Abdu'l-Bahá