The Framework for Action and the Legacy of the Civil Rights Movement[1]

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Abstract
Individuals, communities, and institutions throughout the world are learning about how the evolving framework for action described in the Plans of the Universal House of Justice can be used to create meaningful, lasting transformation in society. This paper suggests that insights into the efficacy of the framework can be gleaned through consideration of its relation to social transformation movements of the past. In particular, contemplation of the history of the Southern civil rights movement engenders appreciation for the prescriptions of the House of Justice. Framework concepts such as the importance of sincere love for humanity, unified action, continuity of action, process-oriented planning, and the connection between service and transformation were vital African American organizers of the civil rights movement. Ultimately, the presentation submits that we honor the richest legacy of the civil rights movement by pursuing—as best we can—noble endeavors in alignment with the framework for action laid out in the Plans of the Universal House of Justice.

Résumé
Partout dans le monde, individus, communautés et institutions apprennent comme le cadre d'action en constante évolution que décrivent les Plans de la Maison universelle de justice peut servir à créer une transformation profonde et durable de la société. Dans le présent article, l'auteur avance que l'on peut avoir un aperçu de l'efficacité d'un tel cadre en examinant son lien avec les mouvements de transformation sociale du passé. En l'occurrence, une réflexion sur l'histoire du mouvement des droits civiques dans le Sud permet de bien saisir les directives de la Maison universelle de justice. Les concepts à la base du cadre d'action, tels que l'importance d'un amour sincère pour l'humanité, d'une action unifiée et continue, d'une planification axée sur le processus et du lien entre le service et la transformation, ont été essentiels pour les organisateurs afro-américains du mouvement des droits civils. En fin de compte, la présentation suggère que nous fassions honneur au précieux héritage du mouvement des droits civiques en poursuivant – du mieux que nous le pouvons – de nobles efforts alignés sur le cadre d'action établi dans les Plans de la Maisonuniverselle de justice.

Resumen
Individuos, comunidades e instituciones en todas partes del mundo están aprendiendo cómo el evolutivo marco de acción descrito en los planes de la Casa Universal de Justicia puede ser utilizado para crear una transformación duradera y con propósito en la sociedad. Este artículo sugiere que las miradas sobre la eficacia del marco de acción pueden profundizarse por medio de la consideración de su relación con los movimientos sociales transformadores del pasado. En particular, reflexionar sobre la histo-

1 This paper was originally presented at the Association for Bahá'í Studies 47th Annual Conference, Atlanta, Georgia, 4-6 August 2023.

ria de los movimientos de derecho civil del Sur engendra aprecio para las recetas de la Casa de Justicia. Los conceptos del marco de acción tales como el sincero amor por la humanidad, acción unificada, continuidad de acciones, planificación orientada en procesos, y la conexión entre el servicio y la transformación fueron elementos organizativos vitales de los movimientos de derechos civiles Afroamericanos. En última instancia, la presentación acepta que honramos el rico legado del movimiento de derechos civiles persuadiéndo, lo mejor que podemos, los nobles esfuerzos alineados con el marco de acción descrito en los planes de la Casa Universal de Justicia.

In the Kitáb-i-Íqán, Bahá'u'lláh poses a rhetorical question: "[I]s not the object of every Revelation to effect a transformation in the whole character of mankind, a transformation that shall manifest itself, both outwardly and inwardly, that shall affect both its inner life and external conditions?" (240) This question is like the riverbed shaping the stream of guidance that pours in to the global Bahá'í community through the Plans of the Universal House of Justice. In some of its messages, the Supreme Body explicitly evokes this rhetorical question.[2] But, for the most part, these words of Bahá'u'lláh remain just below the surface of the precise language that flows from the House of Justice—as when it reminds Bahá'ís and their friends that they are involved in "a process capable of transforming character and shaping social existence" (Riḍván 2016) and that "transformation is the essential purpose of the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh" (Riḍván 1989), and that they participate in an "unfolding process that is to transform the life of humankind" (1 July 2013), and that they "are never to lose sight of the aim of the Faith," which is "to effect a transformation of society" (28 December 2010). Because divinely-appointed authority is bestowed by Bahá'u'lláh upon the Universal House of Justice, Bahá'ís look to its guidance as they make efforts to bring about the inward and outward transformation that is the object of every Revelation. Specifically, Bahá'ís strive to follow the framework for action recommended in the Plans of the House of Justice. Indeed, a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice states, "Giving shape to the community's efforts is a framework for action defined by the global Plans of the Faith. This framework promotes the transformation of the individual in conjunction with social transformation, as two inseparable processes" (19 April 2013). A notable aspect of this framework is that holy texts and the infallible guidance of the House of Justice are not the only sources to which Bahá'ís turn when learning about spiritual and social transformation. In fact, the House of Justice instructs Bahá'ís to "tap into the accumulating knowledge of the human race" as they advance the transformational enterprise guided by the Plans.

2 See, for example, the letter dated Riḍván 2010 from the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the world, and the letter dated 26 November 2012 to all National Spiritual Assemblies.

For more than a half century, social transformation theorists and activists have tapped into knowledge accumulated as a result of the American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. Because the city of Atlanta was the epicenter of that movement, it seems appropriate for us to also consider that knowledge as we are gathered here in Atlanta for the annual conference of the Association of Bahá'í Studies. In particular, we might consider the stores of learning generated by and about the Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) in the context of the civil rights movement of the late 1950s. For a time, the SCLC, headquartered in Atlanta, and lead by Martin Luther King, Jr., was the most important social transformation organization in the U.S. In what follows, I aim to show that knowledge generated by protagonists of the SCLC provides a useful lens for understanding some of the potency and the potential of the concepts and approaches for social transformation developed in the current Plans of the Universal House of Justice.

However, to effectively tap into the knowledge that emerges from the SCLC and the civil rights movement, it is necessary to cleanse our historical vision. We need a clear-eyed understanding of the transformational project that was actually undertaken by thousands of protagonists in the 1950s and 60s. Unfortunately, popular understandings of the movement are quite distorted, and this distorted view of history is often propagated by well-meaning actors who celebrate the movement in reductive ways.

There is a number of reasons that we might lament these distortions. Most importantly, distorted—or what we might call "magical"—histories of the civil right movement can inadvertently undermine efforts to build upon the learnings of the movement. To put it more pointedly, for those of us who seek to release the society building power of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh, the influence of magical histories of the movement can prevent us from appreciating its resonances with the framework for action laid out by the Universal House of Justice.

In these magical histories of the movement, we learn about Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on a Montgomery city bus, and then we hear Martin Luther King delivering his "I Have a Dream" speech, and then we see President Lyndon Johnson signing the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In these versions of history, we are presented with a linear narrative focused on iconic individuals, frozen in iconic moments, that apparently transformed social reality in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Maybe there is a place for this simplified version of history; in fact, it may be helpful to young children who are beginning to learn about the American past. But this type of story, which is tacitly endorsed in many discourses of society and frequently taught in American schools, is a simplification that potentially undermines our understanding of how meaningful social transformation has been and can be achieved.

In this story of change, there is a very small number of larger-than-life protagonists. These heroes seem to have innate powers of charisma and courage. They seem to spontaneously exercise these powers at key moments in the narrative, winning decisive victories. These are stories that we are fed in sixty-second, corporate-sponsored, celebrations of Black history in the month of February. The story is told through the images of Parks sitting pensively on the bus, King directing his voice heavenward, and Malcolm X with his index finger raised. Stories like these follow "The Great Man" theory of history, which teaches us that pivotal individuals arise from among the masses to lead humanity toward salvation or perdition. These stories key upon the undeniable exceptionalism of a few individuals. Certainly, it is important to acknowledge individual greatness—particularly greatness emerging from humble service, pure deeds, and the capacity to encourage, enable, and guide others. But it is also important to recognize pitfalls of overinvestment in magical histories that heroize a few while invisibilizing thousands and reducing complex social realities to singular moments. We should recognize that this view of history can be simplistic, consumable, and potentially pacifying.

These stories bear a resemblance to narratives that are churned out by Hollywood's entertainment machine, which teaches us over and over again that humanity can only be saved by superheroes blessed with magical powers who fight on behalf of disempowered masses who run for cover or cheer from the sidelines. Like movies from such cinematic universes, magical oversimplifying stories about the civil rights movement are thrilling and inspirational. But they don't do a good job of giving us a clear view of the rich and complex history of social transformation that emerged in the southern part of the United States in the 1950s and 60s. And they don't allow us to appreciate the pragmatic wisdom of the framework for action outlined by the Universal House of Justice.

To deepen our appreciation for this framework, we can go back to 1957, the year when the SCLC was formed in Atlanta. The successes of the Montgomery Bus Boycott were becoming apparent, the U.S. supreme court had just ruled that segregation on public transportation was unconstitutional, and Atlanta's own Dr. Martin Luther King was rising to national prominence. In settings throughout the Black south there was a growing recognition of the potential for widespread social transformation. Among those who were thinking deeply about this potential, there was also a growing recognition of the need to establish a systematic approach to change throughout the South. *Systematization* had given rise to the success in Montgomery. Rosa Parks was not simply a tired seamstress who did not want to move to the back of the bus; she was a trained activist who learned strategy as a member of the National Association for the Advancement of

Colored People (NAACP)—the most systematically operating Black organization in the United States at that time. The Montgomery boycott itself was a systematic endeavor, requiring countless hours of consultation, reflection, and sacrificial action taken by hundreds of contributors who were coordinated through the Montgomery Improvement Association. But Montgomery was only one city in a vast territory blanketed by the customs and culture of Jim Crow. To expand the success obtained in Montgomery, King and others called for a new organizational structure, and on 10 January 1957, around sixty ministers from more than ten southern states gathered at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in downtown Atlanta and established the foundations of the SCLC.[3]

This very brief description of the formation of the SCLC in Atlanta adds depth and complexity to magical narratives about the civil rights movement. Of course, this description is itself a vast oversimplification of all that went into the formation of what would become one of the pivotal organizations of the movement. But it differs from a magical narrative in that it calls attention to the organizational machinery that gave rise to iconic figures like Parks and King. It asks us to focus on the well-ordered relationships that built the movement, the deliberate planning that achieved goals, and the collective nature of the enterprise. It is this non-magical conception of the civil rights movement that gives us greater appreciation for the worldwide transformational project currently directed by the House of Justice.

The Bahá'í project of individual and collective transformation is not a magical project. Yes, we are involved in a spiritual enterprise that relies upon divine assistance and prayer, and that recognizes the reality of spiritual power that can be released and channeled through unity, love, humble service, and pure deeds. But the Bahá'í Faith is "scientific in its method."[4] Bahá'ís do not believe that superheroes will descend into our midst, vanquish evil, and build a new civilization. Nor do we believe that a just and unified society will spontaneously emerge if many individuals simply desire it, or act with righteousness. In the early decades of the twentieth century, undoubtedly, there were thousands of African Americans who lived righteously in Montgomery. In and of itself, that righteousness did not create social transformation. Lasting and meaningful change was

3 For more details, I refer the reader to Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem The Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King, Jr.*, 2001, especially pp. 1–37. Also see, David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference*, 1999; Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, 2010; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63*, 2005.

4 See Shoghi Effendi's letter dated June 1933 to Sir Arthur Grenfell Wauchope, the High Commissioner for Palestine.

only possible when hundreds of righteous people developed unity of vision, and sacrificially disciplined and organized themselves within a common framework.

In advancing the transformational project of the worldwide Bahá'í community, the Universal House of Justice has repeatedly called for "a realistic approach, systematic action," "consistency of lines of action based on well-conceived plans," and "an orderliness of approach," as well as the "the need to be clear-headed, methodical, efficient, constant, balanced and harmonious" (Riḍván 1998). Magical narratives of the civil rights movement that ask us to focus primarily on individual courage and the inspiration of charismatic speeches, can blind us to the importance of the planning, organization, and systematization, which was the non-magical foundation of the civil rights movement–and which are central pillars of the Baha'i framework for action. To be clear, the Bahá'í framework is not synonymous with tactics, strategies, or operating principles of the SCLC or other civil rights movement organizations. For example, while the creation and channeling of political pressure was a primary objective for movement planners, Bahá'ís are uncompromising in their refusal to participate in partisan political activity. And, while movement planners had their eyes on the prize of universal civil rights in America, the vision of the worldwide Bahá'í community is trained upon nothing less than the "complete reconceptualization of the relationships that sustain society" (Universal House of Justice, 2 March 2013). Indeed, the Bahá'í framework for action gives shape to an enterprise that is both material and spiritual, and that is meant to bring on a global "transformation of unparalleled majesty and scope" (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 46). It cannot be properly understood in the same terms that describe the operations of social movements with political aims. Nevertheless, by considering the mode of operation that characterized the SCLC, we might strengthen our appreciation for the concepts and approaches for social transformation developed in the Plans of the Universal House of Justice.

If we return our focus to the SCLC and its origins in 1957, we note that although the SCLC was a product of the Black south, its formation was encouraged and fostered by individuals from beyond the region, who operated outside the Black Baptist networks that were at the heart of the SCLC. One of these individuals was Bayard Rustin, probably one of the most important strategists of the civil rights movement. It was Rustin who nurtured King's commitment to non-violent approaches to social change, and counseled him during his rise to fame. But Rustin had been about the business of social transformation for decades before King's involvement in the Montgomery Bus Boycott. Rustin was a labor organizer and staunch pacifist. He had been imprisoned for three years for refusing to be conscripted into the American military, and he had been thrown in jail on

charges related to his sexuality. He was also a brilliant mind—one of the few people said to have outmaneuvered Malcolm X in public debate. But partly because he was openly gay, Rustin has been too often sidelined in histories of the civil rights movement.[5]

It was Rustin who reached out to King in December of 1956, to propose the formation of the SCLC. He recognized that the momentum built by the successful Montgomery Bus Boycott could be amplified through a social architecture that fostered harmonious interactions between individuals, communities, and institutions throughout the South. Rustin knew that churches gave organizational structure to Black activism at the grassroots. He called the church "the most stable social institution in Negro culture" (qtd. In Levine 95). But he also knew that significant transformation of American society could only be achieved if there were systems that connected those churches, and allowed for collective planning and reflection, and the dissemination of learning that would support sustained action.

In the memo that quickened their association, Rustin pointed out to King the unique achievements of the Montgomery Boycott. One of the first statements about the Boycott was plain and simple–three words: "It was organized." King obviously knew this, but Rustin was pointing the young minister toward the horizon of possibility, suggesting to him that future transformational work would also need to be organized, and that larger arenas of work would require more developed schemes of coordination and systematization. But before proposing the formation of what he called "an alliance of groups capable of creating a Congress of organizations," Rustin pointed out a few other features of the Montgomery Boycott that remind us of key elements of the Bahá'í framework for action. Namely, the importance of universal participation, the power released through unified action, and understanding that self-sacrifice is the source of joy. He called attention to the fact that "all social strata of the community were involved". He underscored "[t]he fellowship, the ideals, the joy of sacrifice for others." He pointed out that the boycott had "the strength of unity" which was lacking in earlier school integration efforts that pivoted on "heroic but isolated individuals" who enrolled in segregated schools.[6]

While King was the individual at the center of major events of the civil rights movement, Rustin was the veteran collaborator behind significant *processes* of the movement. His contributions were not glamorous; they didn't attract awards or considerable attention from the press. But for those of us who are thinking about social transformation in the light of the framework for action elaborated by the Universal

5 For a more in-depth treatment, see Branch, especially pp. 168–180.

6 The memo is collected in Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Birth of a New Age, December 1955–December 1956* 491.

House of Justice, Rustin's decades of low-profile work should be well noted. The House of Justice has pointed out that "in a world focused increasingly on the promotion of events, or at best projects, with a mindset that derives satisfaction from the sense of expectation and excitement they generate, maintaining the level of dedication required for long-term action demands considerable effort" (28 December 2010). If our sense of excitement is to be derived from long-term processes rather than singular events, our stories about social transformation should call attention to figures like Bayard Rustin.

But the point is not to elevate Rustin as an alternative hero, replacing King and others in our stories about the civil rights movement. Rustin was a collaborator, who worked alongside an array of like-minded individuals, accompanying others in service to the cause of justice and equity. The point is to bear witness to the contributions of people like Rustin and the uncounted numbers of people who were empowered to make meaningful contributions to the movement through a systematic process. This adjusted vision opens up our understanding of the movement so that we see how it actually operated. When we do that, we find resonance after resonance with the framework for action set forth in the Plans of the Universal House of Justice.

Of course, a key concept in that framework is what the House of Justice describes as "an appreciation of each person's capacity to become a protagonist in a profound spiritual drama" (Riḍván 2021). In any history of the civil rights movement that complicates more familiar magical histories, we need to call attention to a figure who believed deeply in "each person's capacity to become a protagonist." Helping to build this capacity among individuals and organizations was the lifework of Ella Jo Baker, and it is through Baker that we can return to Atlanta.

In that first gathering of what would become the Southern Christian Leadership Council, Baker was present. In fact, when dozens of ministers gathered at the Ebenezer Baptist church on 10 January 1957, their agenda was largely framed by Ella Baker and Bayard Rustin. Baker was twenty-five years older than King and, observing the successes of the Montgomery Boycott, she was one of the three veteran activists who conceived of the need for an organization like the SCLC, along with Rustin and Stanley Levison, the Jewish lawyer who would become a very close confidante of King. When Rustin reached out to King in the memo referenced earlier, he was reaching out on behalf of Baker and Levison. Like Rustin, Baker had been working for social transformation for decades before King attracted national headlines. Among other things, she had been an NAACP field-officer, specializing in grassroots community-building. Like Rustin, she understood that transformation was impossible without serious organization, and that meaningful transformation needed to involve protagonists from every stratum of society,

especially the most dispossessed.[7]

Despite her key role in the social transformation work of the 1930s through the 1960s (and after), she doesn't appear in magical histories of the civil rights movement. She is an unsung hero of unsung heroes. Some scholars and activists have cast Baker as an alternative to King in stories about the movement. These scholars suggest that we reject King as a model of transformative leadership, and instead look to the symbol presented by Baker who worked tirelessly in the shadows of the men who stood at the head of organizations like the NAACP and SCLC. They point us toward forgotten but important historical junctures, such as the period in 1958 when Baker moved from New York to Atlanta to essentially run the SCLC. At that time, King was the visible leader of the organization, but Baker was the day-to-day operations manager who, without fanfare or glamor, executed the ambitious program of transformation that the regional organization tried to implement.

When she arrived in Atlanta she had no office, no phone, and no staff to help her. As she put it, "I had to function out of a telephone booth and my pocketbook" (qtd. in Ransby 181). Baker felt neglected by the male ministers who lead the southern civil rights movement. With good reason, she believed that she was overlooked because of her gender. But she also knew that the ministers kept her at arm's length because her approach to social transformation significantly differed from theirs. The male leaders of the Southern churches were accustomed to organizational structures that set them above and ahead of the congregations they led. Although Baker worked closely and productively with male ministers throughout her career, she was deeply opposed to unchecked ministerial power and the congregationalism of the Black church. This was not just because of the gender dynamics. She also believed that too much enthusiasm about the oratory and charisma of a few a brilliant leaders actually diminished the ability of grassroots protagonists to contribute to the social transformation in their own communities.

Here's how Baker contrasted the traditionalist organizational model with the more democratic model that she advocated: "Instead of the leader as a person who was supposed to be a magic man, you could develop individuals who were bound together by a concept that benefited the larger number of individuals and provided an opportunity for them to grow into being responsible for carrying out a program" (qtd. in Ransby 181).The "magic man" who Baker had in mind when offering this contrast was, of course, epitomized in Martin Luther King, Jr. She feared that King and other brilliant leaders were too often cast as the superheroes who could save the day, while a much "larger number of individuals" became

7 For the most comprehensive treatment of Baker's role in the development of the SCLC and the civil rights movement more broadly, see Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Vision*, especially 170–195.

bystanders in the drama of social transformation.

Some contemporary scholars, following the analysis of Baker, are very critical of the elitist and patriarchal character of the leadership structures of the civil rights movement.[8] They argue that King, for example, did not truly believe in the capacity of the flock that he shepherded. As evidence these scholars have pointed to a 1954 memo written to the congregation of his Dexter Avenue church in Montgomery. In the memo, King writes, "Leadership never ascends from the pew to the pulpit, but descends from the pulpit to the pew." And later he states, "The pastor is to be respected and accepted as the central figure around which the policies and the programs of the church revolve" (qtd. in *Rediscovering Precious Values* 287). This vision of seemingly authoritarian leadership—and its apparent disregard for the inherent nobility and capacity of each individual—seems to contrast sharply with an approach to social transformation "founded on faith in the ability of a population to become the protagonists of their own development" (Universal House of Justice, 30 December 2021).

There are two points that we can bring in to properly contextualize and make sense of these statements, and orient us toward perhaps the most important element of the framework for action set forth in the plans of the Universal House of Justice. The first is to note the details of the circumstances that surround the writing of the memo. In 1954, when he made these statements, King was just twenty-five years old; he had recently accepted the pastorship of a longstanding congregation, full of many of Montgomery's Black elite–the doctors, the businessmen, the school teachers–who, in the rising tide of southern Black activism, and facing the reality of brutal and violent backlash, were not eager to dive into the perilous work of the civil rights movement. King did not make these forceful statements in the midst of a cowering congregation of destitute sharecroppers. He made them as a very young man taking the reins of a church attended by people of capacity, many of whom were much older and more socially conservative than he was. Acknowledgement of this context might considerably alter the way that we think about the statements.

Nevertheless, we should recognize that, in principle, the sentiments expressed by King in his youthful years are not in keeping with that element of the Bahá'í framework for action that underscores the importance of "sound relations among individuals, the community, and the institutions" (Universal House of Justice, 24 July 2013). Nor are they easily compatible with the idea that each one of us is a protagonist.

But—and this is the second point—the understanding of leadership, or

8 For examples, see Erica Edwards, *Charisma and the Fictions of Black Leadership*, 2012; and Charles Payne, "Debating the Civil Rights Movement: The View from the Trenches," in *Debating the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1968* 99–138.

protagonism— expressed by King was destined to rapidly evolve in the fourteen short years between his writing of that memo and his assassination in 1968. We find evidence of this evolution in so many of his actions, and especially in his later writings and preaching. That evolution is due to the humble posture of learning that King took while in action—first in a city, and a region, then in a nation, and ultimately on the world stage. So many of those who worked closely with King noted the humility he brought to the work of social transformation, his willingness to receive insights and even direction from others. Indeed, King was in a learning mode as he gathered together the ministers that would form the SCLC, under the guidance of Rustin and Baker, in 1957.

Here again it is important to note the great difference between popular or magical narratives about the civil rights movement, and the reality of the process of social transformation that actually took place. This key organization of the movement, the SCLC, did not magically spring from the mind of Martin Luther King—in fact, the need for a regional congress that could bring about large-scale change was a concept King was learning about as he looked to the guidance of Rustin and Baker. Moreover, the essential concepts and questions that would guide much of the movement in the late 1950s were not exciting or magical, and they will never be dramatized in Hollywood screenplays. The ideas that the leaders of the SCLC consulted about in Atlanta were laid out in a set of seven working papers, composed by Rustin. Each paper had a focus. Among other things, these papers described the politics of the moment, analyzed the economics of the Southern states, considered the implications of non-violence as a strategy for social change, and proposed organizational structures that would advance the movement. In a very real way, these papers laid out a framework for action that would transform American society. However, Rustin's working papers were not a set of directives that the ministers of the SCLC were meant to follow. Instead, they were documents full of questions that were meant to guide a learning process. Some of the questions needed to be answered through consultation. Others could only be answered through the accumulation of learning developed in the field of action. Here are a few of the questions set forth in the papers:

Do we need a coordinating group for advice and council among the present protest groups?

How can we utilize the bus protest to stimulate interest in voting?

Where and how can new areas of protest grow?

How can mass morale be maintained in periods of set-back?

These are just a few of the dozens of questions that Rustin and Baker put to the ministers of the SCLC, and encouraged them to learn about. Those who gathered in Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist church on 10 January 1957 were trying to bring on a transformation that would create something that had never

been truly achieved in Southern states of America. They were trying to bring about a social order in which the civil rights of Black people were given full protection under the American constitution. Because they were opening up new, uncharted territory, they had no choice—they had to learn about how the social order they envisioned could be achieved.

It's worth noting, again, that the transformation sought by the SCLC was modest in comparison to the "complete reconceptualization" of social relationships that is being pursued by the worldwide Bahá'í community. If those involved in the civil rights movement had no choice but to learn about how to create the society they envisioned, it seems clear that the Bahá'í community can only hope to pursue its radically transformative aims through a systematic process of learning. If Rustin, Baker, King and others were learning how to answer the questions in the inaugurating working papers of the SCLC, the Bahá'í community is using that key element of our framework for action—the process of learning through action—to answer an even more daunting array of questions. Some of those objects of learning are laid out in a key letter of the Universal House of Justice that explains in detail the Bahá'í approach to constructive social transformation–which precludes participation in partisan politics.

Here are just a few of the fundamental questions that guide the learning process of the global Bahá'í community:

How to bring people of different backgrounds together in an environment which, devoid of the constant threat of conflict and distinguished by its devotional character, encourages them to put aside the divisive ways of a partisan mindset, fosters higher degrees of unity of thought and action, and elicits wholehearted participation?

How to enable contingents of men and women to break free from the confines of passivity and the chains of oppression in order to engage in activities conducive to their spiritual, social and intellectual development?

How to help youth navigate through a crucial stage of their lives and become empowered to direct their energies towards the advancement of civilization?

These are only a few of the questions that the Bahá'í community is exploring.[9] My point here is not to try to elaborate the array of questions that underlies the transformative project of the contemporary Bahá'í community. Instead, it is to remind us that the House of Justice organizes that transformative project in terms of questions that are answered through a mode of learning characterized by action, reflection, consultation and study. If we consider the founding documents of the SCLC, it seems fair to say that a culture of learning was central to the civil rights movement of the late 1950s. I am not suggesting that somehow the Universal House of Justice was looking at the

9 These questions are found in the letter dated 2 March 2013 of the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of Iran.

working papers of the SCLC as it established the systematic process of the learning that now guides the endeavors of the Bahá'í community. I am suggesting that any project of transformation that sincerely aims to construct a society that has not yet been built can only do so by adopting a posture of learning. That is why the framework for action requires us to learn into the future.

In recent decades, the plans that guide the learning process of the Bahá'í community have been devoted to the project of building capacity among protagonists of social change. If you're trying to construct a new society, those who will contribute to that construction project must develop a variety of capacities. Maybe a very small number of individuals will innately possess some of those capacities, but the great majority of individuals will need training. This need for capacity development among protagonists has been recognized in many meaningful movements for social change. The most successful of these movements have recognized the need for systematic and institutionalized capacity building.

That was certainly the case with the civil rights movement. Lead by the advocacy of Rustin and King, the SCLC adopted a non-violent approach to social change, which was then similarly adopted among many protest groups in the Jim Crow South. It should be obvious that the capacity for non-violence in the face of brutal violence is innately possessed by only a small number of people. And so, the protagonists who carried out the strategy of nonviolent social change needed to develop the capacity for non-violence through training. Some of us may be familiar with the work of Rev. James Lawson, who affiliated with King and the SCLC soon after its formation, and whose workshops in Nashville institutionalized training for hundreds of key protagonists of the non-violent civil rights movement, including people like John Lewis. If we think about any army–and armies are organizations that are often deployed for the purpose of social transformation through violence–capacity is always built among the infantry through a regimen of training. Like the infantry on the frontlines of a militarized battlefield, those on the frontlines of the Southern civil rights movement went through training courses that raised their capacity for non-violence. James Lawson specialized in systematic capacity-building for the youth who were in the proverbial trenches of the movement. One historian said that Lawson and his colleagues approached their projects with the "care of a chemist," noting that "[e]ach step was meticulously planned, executed, and evaluated" (Branch 260). This was systematic training for what we can call the direct-action "protest program" of the movement.

But the movement was also characterized by another program–what Rustin in the SCLC working papers would call a "constructive program." This element of the movement aimed to build capacities of everyday protagonists, so that they could better contribute to the process of social

transformation, not through protest, demonstrations, and other public displays, but through the development of soft skills. One of the questions of the Working Papers asks: What constructive program is essential for daily commitment and eventual success? And elsewhere in the Papers, there's another question: Should voting clinics become a major part of the constructive program of the bus campaign?

These questions pointed the SCLC toward the training programs that would eventually build citizenship capacity among grassroots protagonists. In order to carry out this vital work of social transformation, which almost never attracted the attention of media, the SCLC would turn to yet another of the unheralded women of the Movement, Septima Clark. A courageous educator, Clark accompanied thousands of grassroots protagonists. She specialized in literacy development and voter education. If access to the voting booth was a primary aim of the movement, Black people whose families had been disenfranchised and denied education for generations needed training so that they might take up the powers of full citizenship with purpose and strategy. Clark knew more about this kind of grassroots training than almost anyone. She had a long history of helping people learn to transform themselves so that they could transform their societies—in fact she had run workshops at the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee that trained Rosa Parks only a few months before Parks sparked the Montgomery Bus Boycott.[10]

A few years after its formation, the SCLC established Citizenship Schools as one of the key institutions in its "constructive program." Headed by Clark, these Schools built capacity among everyday Black folk throughout the South. People learned about budgeting, about the history of the freedom struggle, and about the connection between education and liberation. Those who participated in the process learned to walk a two-fold path—they developed individual capacities so that they could exercise those capacities in the development of their societies. The protagonists of the SCLC were serious about the transformation of American society in the 1950s. They knew that it would not be achieved simply through speeches, protests, and prayer. They knew that their framework for action required systematic capacity building at the grassroots.

We've already touched upon some of the ways in which systematization is a structuring element of the framework for action set forth in the Plans of the House of Justice. In closing, I want to turn to the relationship between building capacity for social transformation and the training institute that now both advances and teaches us about the framework for action. Ten years ago, the House of Justice stated plainly that capacity building is the watchword of

10 For descriptions of Septima Clark's unheralded grassroots work see Branch 263–64.

the plans that guide the global Bahá'í community (2 March 2013). These plans, the framework for action they prescribe, and the importance they give to capacity building, take on great significance when we see the Bahá'í Faith as "a movement aimed at nothing less than the transformation of the world" (Riḍván 2018). As I suggested earlier, the Southern civil rights movement of the 1950s had a more localized focus. But just by briefly describing the work of people like James Lawson and Septima Clark, we can see that it had a robust system for the provision of grassroots education.

It would be naïve, then, for us to think that a movement aimed at nothing less than the transformation of the world could achieve its goals without a robust system of grassroots education. Knowing that this transformation will not happen magically or through prayer and goodwill alone, the Universal House of Justice has put into our hands a powerful system of grassroots education. It has prescribed to us the curriculum and pedagogical methods of the Ruhi Institute, and described the institute as "an essential instrument" (3 January 2022), a "potent instrument" (Riḍván 2019), "a powerful instrument" (9 January 2001).[11] It has suggested to us that this system can help protagonists gain capacities necessary for building society anew. Some three-quarters of a million people have already taken at least one step along the capacity building path established by the Ruhi institute (Riḍván 2021). But many millions more will need to take many steps along this curricular path as we collectively build the capacity to become the leaven capable of transforming societies throughout the world.

Some of the capacities we will build are material and intellectual, such as the capacity to read and engage in rational analysis. But inseparable from those are the spiritual capacities that are needed to build a world civilization that truly reflects the implications of an abiding belief in the oneness of humanity. To bring about organic change in the very structure of society, we need the spiritual capacity to love unreservedly, to serve humanity with humility, and to carry out that service with the purest intentions.

The curriculum and pedagogy of the Ruhi institute are premised on the belief that those spiritual capacities cannot be effectively built through study, consultation, and reflection alone. The educational system prescribed to us in the Plans of the Universal House of Justice holds that spiritual capacity is built in the arena of service—service that transforms society, not in the most grandiose and flashy ways, but in systematic acts of service, which strengthen relationships between protagonists who are equally concerned with personal and social transformation. That is to say, the curriculum and pedagogy of the institute is designed to raise the capacity of individuals to take

11 The Universal House of Justice. To the Conference of the Continental Board of Counsellors, letter dated 9 January, 2001.

action in the field of service. And it is when a prevalent number of people in a community are aspiring to serve with a spirit of selfless devotion that we see social transformation.

The social transformation that was achieved during the era of the civil rights movement came about because of countless acts of selfless devotion carried out by many protagonists that we rarely hear about. I've tried to amplify this history because we mostly hear about the great marches and speeches of the civil rights movement. But those iconic elements of the movement don't always help us appreciate the efficacy of the framework for action set forth in the plans of the Universal House of Justice. That framework doesn't call for soaring speeches or demonstrations in the street. When such images constitute our conception of the prime features of the most transformative social movement in recent American history, we may feel uninspired by the call to act through "intimate conversations" and in "unassuming settings" (Universal House of Justice, letter 22 July 2020).[12] We may feel that the framework for action somehow disregards the lessons of the civil rights movement. In fact, the opposite is true. We learn the movement's real lessons about social transformation when we exercise the intellectual rigor required to look beyond iconic images and magical versions of history. When we have clarity of thought, we learn the real lessons of the civil rights movement. We see the inner workings of its organizational machinery, the systematic manner in which its plans were developed, the role of consultation and study in the execution of those plans, the patient and painstaking implementation of its constructive programs, and the importance of training and capacity-building among its grassroots protagonists. These indispensable elements of the southern civil rights movement are like the ninety percent of the iceberg that hides underwater. These elements were the great mass of the movement, carrying the speeches and the demonstrations that float in the national imagination. When we give proper attention to these aspects of the movement, we develop greater appreciation for the methodical, sober framework for action set forth in the plans of the Universal House of Justice. We begin to see that many of the strategies for social transformation implemented by the protagonists of the civil rights movement, are the same strategies that underpin the framework for action set forth in the plans of the Universal House of Justice. When we give proper attention to this ninety percent of the civil rights movement, we appreciate the way that the framework for action compels us to learn using the rhythm of action and reflection, to use process thinking and to strive for continuity of action, to be focused and coherent in our efforts—and we appreciate the importance of systematic educational programs that build-capacity in an army of grassroots

12 The Universal House of Justice. To the Bahá'ís of the United States of America, letter dated July 22, 2020.

protagonists who strive in the arena of service.

Finally, there is one element that suffuses the entire framework for action and is closely tied to service. Without this element, the framework falls flat, and our efforts to serve cannot be transformative. And that is love.

I have decentered Martin Luther King in the effort to tell a story of the civil rights movement that allows us to see some of its hidden protagonists and its hidden machinery, and to give us a deeper appreciation for the framework for action set forth in the Plans of the Universal House of Justice. But as we turn finally to love, we might bring King back to the story.

On 4 February 1968, about two months before he was taken from this life, King gave a sermon at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in downtown Atlanta, around the corner from where the Atlanta Bahá'í center is today. It's my favorite sermon by King, usually referred to as "The Drum Major Instinct." It is about the desire for distinction that is part of the human instinct—the desire to be great, and what we do with that desire for distinction. In the sermon he lays out all the destruction that this instinct has brought into the world, but as he nears the conclusion of the sermon, he says that this usually destructive desire for greatness can be harnessed for good. He explains that true greatness lies in service, and that everybody can be great because everybody can serve. When he gave this sermon, about eleven years after the SCLC was formed, he was only thirty-nine years old. But at that point he was already beginning to anticipate the end of his life. And as he reaches the crescendo of the sermon he imagines his own funeral and he hopes that whoever is giving his eulogy won't say anything about his Nobel Peace Prize, or any of the other hundreds of prizes he was awarded, and he hopes that they won't say anything about the places where went to school. And then, in that majestic voice of his, he lists off those things that he hopes people will remember him for. Of course, he hoped that we would remember him for his spiritual capacity. And finally, he makes it plain, "I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity" (qtd. in *Testament of Hope* 267).

As we know, on 22 July 2020, the Universal House of Justice dispatched a historic message to the Bahá'ís of the United States. The message guides us toward a framework for action capable of supplanting the profound immorality of racism in our nation. Not surprisingly, the letter guides us toward the same concepts that we associate with the highest aspirations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the thousands of lesser-known protagonists who sacrificially contributed to the civil rights movement. As the letter draws near its conclusion, the Supreme Body interlaces the concepts of transformation, service, and of course, love. It's fitting to conclude with the words of the Universal House of Justice:

> Ultimately, the power to transform the world is effected by love, love

originating from the relationship with the divine, love ablaze among members of a community, love extended without restriction to every human being. This divine love, ignited by the Word of God, is disseminated by enkindled souls through intimate conversations that create new susceptibilities in human hearts, open minds to moral persuasion, and loosen the hold of biased norms and social systems so that they can gradually take on a new form in keeping with the requirements of humanity's age of maturity. You are channels for this divine love; let it flow through you to all who cross your path. Infuse it into every neighborhood and social space in which you move to build capacity to canalize the society-building power of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation. There can be no rest until the destined outcome is achieved. (22 July 2020)

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