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Reasons for Hope: A Progress Report on Achieving World Peace.

by

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Presented to the 25th Annual Conference of the Friends of Persian Culture, Chicago, Sept. 3-6.

- It is a real honor for me to be present at this conference, and speak to you about this important topic: Why should we be hopeful? Indeed, what are the reasons for us to have hope for the future of humanity?
- When we look at the world today, what is most visible to us is a process of collapse and disintegration reflected in the news we hear about violence, racial and religious prejudice, extremist movements, and terrorism.
- It is from such an environment that we have come to this conference, which depicts for us the vision of a world in which all forms of racial, religious, and national prejudice have been eliminated and the human dignity of all people has been recognized; A world in which all nations collaborate with each other based on a body of international law; And, a world in which peace and unity of humankind have been realized.
- Given the apparent contrast between these two visions— one of disintegration and collapse, and the other of advancement toward an ideal civilization – a question arises that must be answered: Is this vision of a peaceful world merely a utopia and a result of our pious hopes and dreams, or is it an achievable goal? And if we are saying that it is, indeed, an achievable goal, what are the empirical and scientific evidences and logical arguments that can provide us with a foundation for hope?
- About 70 years ago, Shoghi Rabbani, authorized interpreter of the Baha’i teachings, provided a new framework for analyzing the macro historical processes in the contemporary world. He proposed the idea that during the last two centuries, the world of humanity has been going through two parallel processes; simultaneously and

side by side. One is the tumultuous process of disintegration and destruction of the old order-- an order which can no longer answer to the needs and potentialities of humanity; and the other, the gradual movement of humanity on a constructive path toward a new global order, aligned with the ideals of a peaceful and just society.

- When I began to search for empirical evidence for today's discussion, I was pleasantly surprised at the large number of quantitative charts available to any researcher; they are all very similar and depict the same trends. Because of the shortness of time, I will only share a few of them.
- One of the things that we notice immediately upon looking at these charts is that revolutionary movements began to take place in every aspect of human life in the early to mid-19th century.
- One of the most obvious of these areas, of course, is that of scientific and technological discoveries and inventions. (See chart of technological inventions in Appendix: Slides # 1, 2, and 3.)
- Starting in the first decades of the 19th century, every horizontal line began to move upward toward exponential growth: Among the most important technological developments of that era was the sending of the first telegraph on May 23, 1844, which brought down the barriers of time and space and began the birth of what we today call the "global village."
- But, the important point is that, aside from the technological advancements that began their exponential rise in the 19th century, many other new historically unprecedented trends also started during the same period, all of which have been moving the human

civilization toward the implementation of the ideals we have spoken about at this conference.

- Many of the charts that quantify these trends can be found in a recent scholarly update by Max Roser, 2014 and 2015, at <http://www.ourworldindata.com>. For illustration purposes, I will, once again, only share a few of them.
- (See chart of increasing recognition of human rights as reflected in enactment of laws abolishing slavery in Appendix: Slide #4.)
- Visible movement in the area of recognition of human rights started in the 1800's and led to the Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. This chart reflects that trend in the number of laws that were enacted against slavery during that period.
- Of course, assessing progress does not, in any way, mean that the work toward achieving full recognition of human rights around the world or any of the other ideals we uphold is finished. It is just to show the constructive trends that have become quite visible during the last century.
- Another notable chart is the Human Development Index, as a summary index consisting of three aspects: Life expectancy, Literacy and education, and GDP growth and decreasing poverty. (See chart in Appendix: Slide #5)
- On average, there has been visible positive movement in all parts of the world in health, life expectancy, literacy, and reduction in the levels of poverty. During the last 15 years, in particular, "extreme poverty" as defined by the U.N., has finally been eradicated.
- And most notably: Chart of decrease in violence and war deaths. (See Appendix: Slide #6).

- During the 19th century, the average number of deaths in the wars of the French Revolution stood at 70 out of every 100,000 people. In the 20th century, with two World Wars and a few genocides, that average was still reduced to 60. In the 21st Century, deaths in war are down dramatically, to .3 per 100,000.
- During the last several decades, many scholars have noticed the decline in the number of wars and instances of violence around the world, and have written several books about it.
- Due to the shortness of time, I will share some of the points made by one of the most recent of these scholars, Steven Pinker, a professor of psychology at Harvard University. Pinker's voluminous book, published in 2011, is titled *The Higher Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined*. As the name suggests, this book documents the decline of violence in our world, and the loss of legitimacy, not only of war, but of all forms of violence in the collective international culture.
- Pinker reminds us that just a few centuries ago, invading other countries and conquering them were a normal job description for every national leader. However, during the last several decades, invasion for the purpose of territorial expansion has not only gradually disappeared from the pages of history; it has become illegal under international law.
- Despite the fact that civil wars still continue to rage in some parts of the world, during the last 40 years many significant transformative events have happened in the direction of a more peaceful world.
 - 1) The Soviet Union and the U.S. declared peace, officially ending the Cold War which had made the threat of a nuclear conflagration a part of every child and

adult's daily experience; the Iron Curtain in Europe was torn down, and the former Soviet republics became independent states.

- 2) China began its peaceful rise, and is today a major trading partner to the U.S. and the rest of the world.
- 3) Apartheid was dismantled in South Africa, and the white minority peacefully ceded power to the black majority.
- 4) Fascism and dictatorship gave way to liberal democracy in countries that had gone from one military coup to another, among which we can name Portugal, Spain, Greece, Taiwan, South Korea, and many countries in South and Central America. There were fewer than 20 democracies in the world in 1976. Today, that number has increased to over 100.
- 5) Most remarkably, Europe, which had given the world two of its bloodiest wars as recently as the first half of the 20th century, found its way to peaceful cooperation. This process first began with the formation of a multilateral economic collaboration called the European Coal and Steel Community, and then expanded to become the European Economic Community, and today the European Union, complete with its own European Parliament and laws, the European court and a common currency. The borders between these countries, which had seen so much bloodshed for centuries, are now marked by nothing more than a welcome sign.
- 6) In the last half-century, the countries of the world have signed the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, and though imperfect, the discussions surrounding it have gradually given rise of a culture of 'nuclear taboo' and even an international movement by several former and current world leaders toward the 'Global Zero.'

which advocates for the elimination of nuclear weapons among all nations in the world.

- 7) Another positive development has been the end to the process of colonialization, which was completed in 1960, with formal political independence of all former colonies. While the destructive trend still continues in the form of “neo-colonial” practices, the two categories of imperial war, a) to gain sovereignty, and b) colonial war to keep it, no longer exist.
- In addition to all of these developments, each component of the war-friendly mindset (which still exist in the destructive trend); such as nationalism, popular acceptance of war, and indifference to its human costs, is accompanied by the parallel constructive process of growth in such ideas as “world citizenship,” an acute awareness of the human and monetary costs of war, and the realization that no war in recent human memory has been able to produce a clear winner.
 - But to just speak about these trends with data is not enough. A scientific discussion needs both the data on the patterns and trends, as well as a logical explanation that would only be possible if we can pinpoint the cause of these transformative trends. In other words, once we have seen this data the question becomes: what is/are the cause(s) for these dramatic shifts and changes?
 - Steven Pinker tries to explain these patterns of reduction in violence through their association with the other civilizing trends, such as increases in levels of democracy, literacy, IQ, and economic independence, all of which have also moved in the positive direction.

- In essence, Pinker, offers the explanation that our human reason combined with the desire to preserve our self-interest, has led us from the lower aspects of our nature toward the “Higher Angels of Our Nature”: self-control, empathy, and cooperation.
- However, none of these attempts at logical reasoning are able to pinpoint a cause or explain why human beings started becoming visibly more literate, intelligent, and rational in the 19th century, and what has been the cause of the accelerating momentum toward the advancement of civilization.
- In response to this question, we can put forward the idea/thesis here that the source of these changes has been the discovery of new spiritual truths.
- Just as there are physical laws and formulas that science is always seeking to discover, there are also spiritual laws and formulas. And these spiritual formulas are equally as precise and powerful as the physical laws.
- For example, when a scientist discovers a physical law, such as magnetism, or the power of electricity; or when Einstein discovered that $E=MC^2$; all of them discovered a truth that had always existed, but until that moment, we were oblivious to it. That is precisely why these events are called “discoveries.” Scientific discovery of a cause and effect relationship means taking the veil away from a physical truth that has always existed, but until that moment of discovery we were not able to see it and understand it.
- Once a physical truth is discovered, it unavoidably spreads throughout the world, and different people are inspired by it and enabled to advance it to the next level; namely, to use the discovery to innovate new things that did not exist in the world before. In

other words, the discovery of new truths is always followed by new inventions based on that discovery.

- It was the discoveries of physical truths, and the innovations based on them, that have been the source of the accelerating processes of technological change, and enabled us to turn silicon, which is elemental sand, into means of communication with distant planets.
- In the same way, the 19th century saw the discovery of major spiritual truths that humanity was previously oblivious to. Just like the scientific discoveries of physical truths, these spiritual truths had always existed, but until the veil was removed from them, humanity was not aware of them.
- Not long after the transmission of the first telegraphic message and the birth the global village on May 23, 1844, Baha'u'llah, the founder of the Baha' Faith, announced these unprecedented new spiritual truths to the world of humanity:
“The earth is but one country and mankind its citizens.”
“Ye are the fruits of one tree and the leaves of one branch.”
“This is the ageless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future.”
“Women and men have always been, and will always be, equal in the sight of God.”
(See <http://www.bahai.org>)
- These fundamental truths were not revealed as commandments or something to be aspired to. They were revealed as spiritual laws and formulas that have always been true, but humanity had remained oblivious to them. So, Baha'u'llah did not give a commandment saying that everyone should now think of themselves as world citizens; rather, that: The planet earth is, indeed, one country. The dividing lines are

imaginary social constructs. He did not say, it is preferable that we give women equal rights; rather that in reality: “Women and men have always been equal.” He did not say, it is preferable that religions tolerate one another, rather that: They are, in truth, all one, and have come from the same source!

- Another important new concept revealed by Baha’u’llah was the following:

“The time must come when the imperative necessity for the holding of a vast, an all-embracing assemblage of men will be universally realized. The rulers and kings of the earth must needs attend it, and, participating in its deliberations, must consider such ways and means as will lay the foundations of the world’s Great Peace amongst men. . . Should any king take up arms against another, all should unitedly arise and prevent him.” Today, we know this formula as “collective security.”

Shortly after the revelation of these truths, many innovations began to appear in human history for the first time. For example:

- 1) The first stirrings of ACTION toward the concept of “women’s suffrage/liberation,” which went beyond limited philosophical discussions, happened with two events coinciding in close historical succession in June and July of 1848; One at Badasht, in Iran, during which Tahirih Qurrat-ul-Ayn removed the veil from her face as a symbolic act of removing the veil from the promise of a new world order; And the other at the Seneca Falls conference in New York, where Elizabeth Cady Stanton and her compatriots passed a declaration on the need to advance the rights of women, including the then very radical idea of voting rights for women.

- 2) Another innovation was the rapid rise in the number of peace societies. The number of these societies multiplied to 400 from the middle to the end of 19th century.
- 3) Yet another innovation marked the first time in human history that the idea of peaceful coexistence among nations went beyond being a topic of discussion among thinkers and philosophers, to become an idea discussed by the world's political leaders. In 1899, Tsar Nicholas II of Russia convened the first international conference of the world's sovereigns in Hague, to discuss a means for the peaceful settlement of disputes. The most tangible product of that conference was the establishment of a panel of experts in international law that could offer help in settling international disputes.
- 4) Not long after that conference, the destructive process in the world led to the outbreak of WWI. It was the horrific shock of that bloodshed that propelled the world leaders to take steps to strengthen the constructive innovation that had taken place at the Hague two decades earlier. This time, the Treaty of Versailles in 1919 contained a provision for the establishment of a Permanent Court of International Justice, and the world's first formally organized intergovernmental body, the League of Nations, which was established in 1920. Although the League collapsed within two years, it provided an important precedent for the coming together of the world's nations within a collective system.
- 5) Once again, within a decade, the destructive processes in the world led to the Second World War. But this time, the magnitude of the destruction and

bloodshed stimulated the resolve of the international community to establish the United Nations.

- Thus, half a century after the first intergovernmental gathering at Hague, the ideas discussed at that conference came to full fruition; first with the establishment of the World Court as an integral part of the U.N., and then 50 years after that, with the establishment of the International Criminal Court, both of which are now headquartered at the Hague, and are empowered to enforce international law, with the World Court hearing cases against nations, and the ICC having the jurisdiction to prosecute individual leaders of nations for crimes against humanity.
- Another innovation has been the international peacekeeping by the U.N. This process started with the sending of unarmed blue berets into various hot spots in the world as observers to help keep the peace. Over the last few decades, the U.N. peacekeeping forces have evolved and are now allowed to carry and use arms to protect themselves and others. Today, the U.N. peacekeeping force represents the largest deployed military body in the world, with 97,000 soldiers from 110 countries. This peacekeeping force has an 80% success rate in enforcing ceasefires. Perhaps the reason we don't hear much about them in the news is precisely because they are so successful.
- Among other constructive trends toward peace and a new world order, which we only have time to mention in passing are: a) the global collaboration on preserving the environment, which is going to reach a new peak in Paris at the international conference on the environment in Dec. 2015, and b) the birth and rapid growth of the

interfaith movement, particularly in the years of the 21st century, with another major event, the Parliament of World Religions, to be held in the U.S. in October 2015.

- Given the prior history of humanity, pock-marked by one war after the other, how can we explain this movement toward a peaceful international order? Can these constructive historical trends be anything other than innovations based on the discovery of new spiritual truths?
- Even in this brief discussion, we can see clearly that the building of a new order has moved forward parallel to the destructive process. Every horrific event in the destructive plane has fueled the constructive process in an unprecedented dialectic. Indeed, with each wall of the old house coming down, a new wall has gone up in the new one; and both processes have been happening simultaneously, and alongside each other.
- In this unprecedented dialectic, the processes of destruction and construction do not truly clash with one another; rather, they both move forward, each on its own plane. These two processes are related only in the sense that each destructive event creates an initial shock and turmoil that, instead of in any way reversing humanity's progress, gives new energy and fuel to the constructive process.
- In addition, in this new dialectic, we see that both of these parallel movements are irreversible. Once an old system has been abolished, efforts to re-establish it, however forceful and bloody-- or temporarily successful -- are doomed to ultimate failure. And, by the same token, once a new evolutionary constructive trend has been put into motion, it cannot be turned back. It will continue to live and grow.

- In 1985, which was also declared the International Year of Peace by the U.N., the Universal House of Justice, the highest organ of the Baha'i international community, issued a statement on peace, entitled *The Promise of World Peace*, which was distributed to all world leaders and heads of state, including the then presidents Reagan and Gorbachev. Among the key passages of that message we find this quote: "World peace is not only possible, but inevitable . . . Whether peace is to be reached only after unimaginable horrors precipitated by humanity's stubborn clinging to old patterns of behavior, or is to be embraced now by an act of consultative will, is the choice before all who inhabit the earth."
- Obviously, the best option for humanity would be for the ultimate stage of peace to be realized as an act of collective will, and not after unimaginable horrors -- as has been the new dialectic pattern of the last two centuries.
- And that is where the direct role being played by the Baha'is around the world comes in. Since the birth of the Faith, the role of the Baha'i international community all around the world has been to work to strengthen the constructive process, so that the world reaches this inevitable stage of peace and unity with the least amount of suffering and turmoil, and ultimately as an "act of consultative will," not "after unimaginable horrors."
- Since its inception, the Baha'i community has been playing an important role in moving this constructive historical process forward. As soon as the Faith was established internationally, the Baha'i international community placed its emphasis on disinterested service to all people in each village, town, and country. A Baha'i

NGO joined the U.N. in 1948, and since then has been one of the U.N.'s most active members. The Baha'i NGO, which today represents the full diversity of races and tribes across the globe with more than 2200 races and tribes represented, is focused on promoting the universal principles that benefit all of humanity. It regularly contributes various plans of action on economic development, promotion of human rights and equal status for women, and other topics of global concern, and assists in organizing of major gatherings sponsored by the U.N. Among these we can mention the co-chairing of the Millennium Summits of world religious and political leaders, in the year 2000.

- The same vision of service to all of humanity has propelled the social and economic development projects initiated by Baha'i individuals and organizations across the globe.
- These projects, all of which engage the grassroots of the local community, involve many types of social and economic activities all around the world: from promoting environmental protection in India and Cameroon, to cooperating with local health authorities in prevention of Malaria in Mozambique, to literacy projects in Guyana and Uganda and establishing schools in Thailand, Malawi, Tanzania, Mali, Philippines, India, Haiti and South Africa, to organizing Baha'i doctors from around the world to provide medical service to remote places across the globe, to establishing an Institute for Advancement of rural women in India, to hundreds of other projects which we have no time to mention.
- In addition to these professional Baha'i inspired efforts, since about 20 years ago the Baha'i world has entered a new stage, where individual Baha'is around the world are

taking systematic action wherever they live to help improve and transform their communities through service. The services offered are not limited to the Baha'i community and extend to everyone, regardless of background, race, gender, or religion. These include offering classes for the children and junior youth to help them understand their nobility as human beings and empower them to play their part in service to their community and humanity.

- These efforts have been very successful in bringing positive change and transformation to diverse communities around the globe. A recent video, available at <http://www.bahai.org/frontiers>, documents developments in four countries, Colombia, Congo, Canada, and India. The narration for the video consists of people in the community, speaking about their experiences. I will just share a few quotes from the segment on India, a country that has long-standing and seemingly immovable traditions. One of these is caste prejudice, which is very deeply ingrained. People from high and low castes do not mix with one another because the people of the lower caste are considered untouchable. Also, women have a very low status in the rural areas and, in particular, the economic consequences of having a daughter are devastating. When a family has a daughter, they have to start saving money to pay the dowry demanded by prospective suiter's parents.
- The video shows that the rural community-building efforts by the Baha'is in Behar Sharif in India have been amazingly successful in changing these old cultural patterns. A young man says: "When I was a child, my grand-parents told me not to go into the homes of people from other castes, or eat with them. So, I thought it was

true. Then, when I took the Ruhi courses . . . , I began going to friends' houses, eating with them and talking with them.”

A young mother says: “While raising our son, we decided not to tell him which caste he belongs to, so that he will never have the thought that he is superior or inferior. . . He will see everyone as equal.”

Mother of a young woman, recently married to a Baha’i young man in a remote village says: “Our daughter, after making her own choice at age 25, asked us for consent, and then got married. For her marriage, no dowry was demanded.”

- So, the constructive trend is moving forward in two ways. One is indirect; through what we may call the power of the “Spirit of the New Age” that has been released into the world as a result of the discovery of new spiritual truths. And the other is direct; through individual and collective action by the Baha’is to help move that process forward. While the Spirit of the Age indirectly propels the world forward on the innovative path of construction – of which the patterns of international cooperation, collective security, and emergence of international law are examples -- Baha’is are involved in advancing the constructive process by building model communities in the remotest places around the world.
- In this juncture, it is appropriate to make a brief footnote to address the question of why Baha’is do not get involved in partisan politics.
- Based on what we have talked about, Baha’is, both individually and collectively, are involved, every day of their lives, in building up a positive future for all of humanity. Accordingly, they are aware that spending their energies in the arena of the destructive adversarial practices of partisan politics will not only fail to make any

positive contribution within that tottering and collapsing system, it will also distract them from doing the constructive work of building new model communities where peace, justice, and unity of races and religions, and equality of women are the norm. With this awareness, every Baha'i remains focused on promoting the constructive politics of establishing a just and peaceful world for all of humanity.

- Among the model communities being built by the Baha'is all around the world, we know one of them very well. And that is the Baha'i community in our beloved Iran.
- Much has been said, and books have been written before, about the contributions of the Baha'is to the advancement of Iran; the intellectual contributions in support of the establishment of democratic institutions, efforts to advance equal rights for women, and numerous innovations in industry, commerce, and education, which we don't have time to enumerate here.
- What is clear, however, is that even after the 1979 Revolution and the dramatic increase in the persecution of the Baha'is in Iran, this orientation to serve and build model communities within the constructive trend of advancing human civilization in Iran has not changed. Under the greatest hardship and pressure, the Baha'is in Iran have continued to act in accordance with the principles of peaceful collaboration, unity, and service to others. No doubt, only a community imbued with the spirit of the newly revealed truths for this age can have the power to maintain its peacefulness and composure under the relentless attack on each member's life, livelihood, and all they hold sacred during the last 36 years. It is only a community that works within the constructive trend in the life of humanity that can create a miracle like the underground Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE); to rise to the challenge of

educating its young people—who are barred from attending university due to their Faith-- through spirit of unity and collaboration among all of the people in the community, from the students themselves to the professors, to the people who provided their homes, and many other collaborators; and to continue their efforts uninterrupted, regardless of how many times they are raided and their assets confiscated and their educators imprisoned.

- What we have had time to discuss today are only a few examples of the constructive trend that is moving forward in Iran and in the world alongside the more visible destructive trends. One thing we can be sure of is this: No matter what happens in the destructive plane, this constructive trend cannot be stopped, and it cannot be turned back.
- Indeed, we can already see the outlines of this beautiful vision of the new order taking shape in front of our eyes throughout the world, both indirectly through an unprecedented dialectic that has been put into motion by the revelation of these spiritual truths, and directly through the efforts of the Baha'is around the globe.
- It is my hope that based on these visible and irreversible constructive patterns, whose success and triumph is inevitable, our hope for the future of our dear Iran and the world of humanity can shine even more brightly, and light the way to new acts of service toward achieving our ultimate goal.
- Let me conclude with these words from Baha'i writings about the future of Iran and the world.
- “Iran will become the most flourishing/prosperous country in the world.”
- “These ruinous wars . . . shall pass, and the Most Great Peace shall come!”

