

## MEMORANDUM

**To:** The Universal House of Justice

**Date:** 17 July 1989

**From:** The Research Department

### UNDERSTANDING TESTS

The Research Department has studied the issues raised in the letter dated 21 May 1989 from Mr. ... to the Universal House of Justice. A pioneer in the West Indies, Mr. ... has been experiencing financial difficulties which may well jeopardize his ability to remain in the pioneering field. Based on his current dilemma, he poses a number of questions. We provide the following response.

#### 1. Recognizing a "Closed Door"

As to whether there is some kind of "litmus test" to help differentiate between a closed door which is a sign to do something else or one which represents a challenge to persist in the present situation, there is no one way to make such a determination. There are, however, a number of guidelines which might be derived from the extracts cited below. For example:

- intuition is a fallible guide

With regard to your question as to the value of intuition as a source of guidance for the individual: implicit faith in our intuitive powers is unwise, but through daily prayer and sustained effort one can discover, though not always and fully, God's will intuitively. Under no circumstances, however, can a person be absolutely certain that he is recognizing God's will, through the exercise of his intuition. It often happens that the latter results in completely misrepresenting the truth, and thus becomes a source of error rather than of guidance.

(From a letter dated 29 October 1938 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

- "guidance" is when we "make every effort, and the doors open"

The Master said when we feel we should do a thing and then make every effort, and the doors open, this is guidance. If, in spite of all we do, the doors remain closed, it cannot be guidance, generally speaking.

(From a letter dated 9 February 1949 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to two believers)

- if a plan does not work, "assume it is not the right one"

The Master said guidance was when the doors opened after we tried. We can pray, ask to do God's will only, try hard, and then if we find our plan is not working out, assume it is not the right one, at least for the moment.

(From a letter dated 29 October 1952 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

- some steps in seeking guidance

It is not sufficient to pray diligently for guidance, but this prayer must be followed by meditation as to the best methods of action and then action itself. Even if the action should not immediately produce results, or perhaps not be entirely correct, that does not make so much difference, because prayers can only be answered through action and if someone's action is wrong, God can use that method of showing the pathway which is right....

(From a letter dated 22 August 1957 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

- four ways of receiving guidance

Your desire to follow the Will of God in all things in your life is highly praiseworthy and will, indeed, as you have experienced, bring spiritual confirmations. However, the House of Justice stresses that the avenue by which one receives guidance is not confined to inspiration, which can, in fact, be highly misleading.

God has endowed human beings with more than one way of receiving guidance in the decisions we have to make, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá has explained. There are the Holy Writings, in which are clear directions for the way in which we should live; if an inner voice prompts us to act contrary to the explicit teachings we can be sure that, far from being an inspiration from God, that inner voice is the expression of our own lower nature, and should be disregarded. There is also the gift of intelligence and good judgement—the faculty which distinguishes man from the animal kingdom; God intends us to use this faculty, which can be a powerful instrument for distinguishing between true inspirations and vain imaginings. There is the power of prayer through which we strive to purify our motives, to seek the Will of God and to implore His guidance and assistance. There is also the law of consultation, one of the distinguishing features of this great Revelation. Consultation is to be used not only in the functioning of the Administrative Order, but is also available for the individual in solving his own problems; he may consult with his Assembly, with his family and with his friends.

Thus, in solving the problems which now confront you, the House of Justice urges you to worry less about the desirability of following what you perceive to be inspiration, and to bring to bear the other methods that God has given for the solution of difficulties. It suggests that you consult your Spiritual Assembly or an Auxiliary Board member or, if you have close friends whose judgement you respect, consult with them and pay careful attention to their advice....

(From a letter dated 29 November 1982 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual believer)

## 2. Enduring Patiently

Mr. ... asks for guidance about what to do while enduring patiently. He expresses the view that it seems inadequate to wait passively for solutions and draws attention to practical problems that arise, especially the obligations and responsibilities to other people. Patience and

radiant acquiescence are encouraged in times of testing; for example, Shoghi Effendi in a letter dated 14 July 1939 written on his behalf to an individual believer stated:

The Guardian would, therefore, urge you to whole-heartedly persevere in your labours, to be ever patient, and happy in the assurance that Bahá'u'lláh will bless and guide you in your efforts, and is continually watching over you from His Heavenly Realm, ready to extend to you whatever strength and assistance you require for the accomplishment of your task. It is up to you to so diligently persist in your endeavours, and to show forth such radiant acquiescence to accomplish His will, as to draw upon yourself and your work His promised and unfailing confirmations.

It is not, however, a passive stance. The Guardian, in a letter of 7 September 1926, counselled a believer who was encountering great difficulties in these terms:

I wish you, dear and trusted collaborator, to stand firm and immovable as a mountain, undismayed by ingratitude and trials, forbearing, long-suffering, and patient. I have the greatest admiration for your strenuous, devoted and continuous labours for the consolidation of our beloved Cause, and I wish you to take as active and leading a part as in the past in the administrative activities of the Cause. Be not disheartened, and let not disappointments overpower you. Fix your gaze upon the Invisible Source of Divine Blessings Who alone knows your self-sacrifice, and Who alone can befittingly reward you. Exert a fresh endeavour to clarify all past and obscure issues, exercise afresh forbearance, kindness and patience, and remember that every renewed effort on your part will mean a step nearer to the goal which you have set yourself to attain.

There are also a number of other principles that are potentially relevant to Mr. ...'s questions, such as:

- the importance of balance

As to the proper balance to attain—that is very difficult! Saints and Martyrs did not have any “balance”, all they had they sacrificed for the Cause. But this is a very high station, and no one can tell another person that he should try to attain it.  
(From a letter dated 19 January 1950 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

- consideration for family

Surely Shoghi Effendi would like to see you and the other friends give their whole time and energy to the Cause, for we are in great need for competent workers, but the home is an institution that Bahá'u'lláh has come to strengthen and not to weaken. Many unfortunate things have happened in Bahá'í homes just for neglecting this point. Serve the Cause but also remember your duties towards your home. It is for you to find the balance and see that neither makes you neglect the other...

(From a letter dated 14 May 1929 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

- attention to material needs and service to the Faith

The advice that Shoghi Effendi gave you regarding the division of your time between serving the Cause and attending to your other duties was also given to many other friends both by Bahá'u'lláh and the Master. It is a compromise between the two verses of the "Aqdas", one making it incumbent upon every Bahá'í to serve the promotion of the Faith and the other that every soul should be occupied in some form of occupation that will benefit society. In one of His Tablets Bahá'u'lláh says that the highest form of detachment in this day is to be occupied with some profession and be self-supporting. A good Bahá'í, therefore, is the one who so arranges his life as to devote time both to his material needs and also to the service of the Cause.

(From a letter dated 26 February 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

- limit to self-sacrifice

In regard to your contribution to the Temple fund, he wishes me to inform you that such offerings and contributions to the Cause are essential for the safeguard and promotion of its interests. It is by means of such self-sacrificing efforts on the part of the believers, in both East and West, that the Temple has been erected and its completion should be hastened and ensured by the collective and continued efforts of all the friends. There is, however, and should always be, a limit to their self-sacrifice. We should learn to give and be careful not to give to such an extent that our own development and growth may be severely hampered. We have to carefully and wisely divide our resources in such a way as to ensure the fair and equal development of our entire personality. Excess has always been a source of trouble. Moderation should be, there-fore, our guide in all we do, whether in our personal or collective work.

(From a letter dated 1 October 1933 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

### **3. and 4.      The Proper Lesson**

Mr. ... refers to statements from 'Abdu'l-Bahá about the two kinds of tests, for punishment and development, and to the effect that everything in life promotes our development. He enquires how to determine what kind of test it is and how to discover the proper lesson which is to be learned.

As to the nature of tests, in "Paris Talks: Addresses given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Paris in 1911-1912", 10th ed. (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979), 'Abdu'l-Bahá states that the trials of man are of two kinds. Those that are the "consequences" of man's "own actions", and those "which come upon the Faithful from God". See pages 49-51. In the letter dated 19 March 1945, cited below, which was written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, the Guardian draws attention to the role of free will and expands the concept to "calamities" to include "accidents, plain cause and effect". The letter states:

There are two factors, God's Will and our free will: we are not puppets, if we make mistakes we have to pay for them. Bahá'u'lláh sought to prevent and avert the wars of the last 50 years or so. No one listened. We are being chastised for our

good now, by all this suffering, but there was an easier way, to accept the Message sent by God. We would not take that way; therefore He sends us this one.

We must take the teachings as a great, balanced whole, not seek out and oppose to each other two strong statements that have different meanings; somewhere in between, there are links uniting the two. That is what makes our Faith so flexible and well balanced. For instance there are calamities for testing and for punishment—there are also accidents, plain cause and effect!

With regard to the proper lesson to be drawn from testing experiences, the following extracts serve to highlight different aspects of this subject. For example:

- tests are “benefits from God”

Tests are benefits from God, for which we should thank Him. Grief and sorrow do not come to us by chance, they are sent to us by the Divine Mercy for our own perfecting.

(“Paris Talks: Addresses given by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Paris in 1911–1912”, 10th ed. (London: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1979), p. 50)

- tests recur until we overcome them

The more one is severed from the world, from desires, from human affairs, and conditions, the more impervious does one become to the tests of God. Tests are a means by which a soul is measured as to its fitness, and proven out by its own acts. God knows its fitness before-hand, and also its unpreparedness, but man, with an ego, would not believe himself unfit unless proof were given him. Consequently his susceptibility to evil is proven to him when he falls into the tests, and the tests are continued until the soul realizes its own unfitness, then remorse and regret tend to root out the weakness.

The same test comes again in greater degree, until it is shown that a former weakness has become a strength, and the power to overcome evil has been established.

(‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in “Star of the West”, vol. 6, no. 6 (June 24, 1915), p. 45)

- some things will always remain a mystery

As long as there will be life on earth, there will be also suffering, in various forms and degrees. But suffering, although an inescapable reality, can nevertheless be utilized as a means for the attainment of happiness. This is the interpretation given to it by all the Prophets and saints, who, in the midst of severe tests and trials, felt happy and joyous and experienced what is best and holiest in life. Suffering is both a reminder and a guide. It stimulates us to better adapt ourselves to our environmental conditions, and thus leads the way to self-improvement. In every suffering one can find a meaning and a wisdom. But it is not always easy to find the secret of that wisdom. It is sometimes only when all our suffering has passed that we become aware of its usefulness. What man considers to be evil turns often to be a cause of infinite blessings. And this is due to his desire to know more than

he can. God's wisdom is, indeed, inscrutable to us all, and it is no use pushing too far trying to discover that which shall always remain a mystery to our mind.

(From a letter dated 29 May 1935 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

- pray to discover the wisdom behind suffering

Although you seem to feel that your prayers have not so far been answered, and do no longer have any hope that your material conditions will ameliorate, the Guardian wishes you nevertheless not to allow such disappointments to undermine your faith in the power of prayer, but rather to continue entreating the Almighty to enable you to discover the great wisdom which may be hidden behind all these sufferings. For are not our sufferings often blessings in disguise, through which God wishes to test the sincerity and depth of our faith, and thereby make us firmer in His Cause?

The true worshipper, while praying, should endeavour not so much to ask God to fulfil his wishes and desires, but rather to adjust these and make them conform to the Divine Will. Only through such an attitude can one derive that feeling of inner peace and contentment which the power of prayer alone can confer.

(From a letter dated 26 October 1938 written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer)

- when one door closes one has the freedom to open other doors

In a letter dated 11 June 1987 written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to a believer who was experiencing difficulty in pioneering to a chosen country, the House of Justice stressed the fact that inability to settle in the desired place did not necessarily constitute a failure on the part of the individual. The letter states:

This should not necessarily mean a failure on your part; it could simply mean that the door you are wishing to force open should, for reasons not immediately clear to you, remain closed. Certainly, you are free to open other doors. A vast array of teaching opportunities stands before you on the home front. Seize one of these and act with complete reliance on the Blessed Beauty...