

'Abdu'l Bahá said of the Manifestations of God that *"All Their states, Their conditions, Their acts, the things They have established, Their teachings, Their expressions, Their parables and Their instructions have a spiritual and divine signification"*. It is therefore quite significant that the Bahá'í Faith began, at least officially, in a garden. A garden is where you plant things to grow and nurture. It could be said that that 'garden' of Ridvan represents 'us', 'humanity', and that Bahá'u'lláh's Declaration in 1863 was like the planting of a seed into this 'garden' of humanity. And this 'seed' has grown and emerged from the soil and has been cultivated over the last century and a half, first by Bahá'u'lláh Himself, then by The Master, then by the Guardian, and now the whole Administrative Order and the worldwide Bahá'í community is in the business of gardening and cultivating these beautiful plants which Bahá'u'lláh planted in that garden, that garden which is us - the human race. So what exactly were these seeds that Bahá'u'lláh planted with His Declaration? Bahá'u'lláh made three specific statements when He declared at Ridvan.

The first statement that Bahá'u'lláh made at His Declaration was the abrogation of Holy War. For most of humanity's history, war was not seen as something inherently bad. Only in the 20th century, at the end of the First World War, humanity as a whole began to realise that its capacity for destruction had increased dramatically, and the world at large started to come to a general feeling that war is perhaps something we'd be better off without. Obviously we still have a long way to go. But for most of human history, war was seen as a necessary part of life, sometimes even a glorious part. In religious history, no Manifestation of God had ever abrogated war. Moses, for example, as well as being a spiritual leader, was also a military leader - and apparently a brilliant one. The very same can be said of Muhammad, King David and the other Kings of the Bible. Jesus Christ, although He didn't engage in war, did not forbid it, and even commanded His disciples to "sell your cloak and buy a sword" to defend themselves against Roman Soldiers. Even the Báb made detailed provisions and laws concerning the whole issue of Holy War. So this statement - this abrogation of Holy War - which can be considered, chronologically, as the very first principle of Bahá'í Civilization, represents the first seed that Bahá'u'lláh planted in the Garden of Ridvan - the seed of a new culture, a culture of non-violence, and even more broadly, a culture of non-aggression, a culture of dialogue and consultation.

The second statement, the second 'seed' that Bahá'u'lláh planted in the Garden of Ridvan, was that no Manifestation of God would appear on earth for at least 1,000 years. What this statement implies is a tremendous level of freedom and focus for the Bahá'í Community. To understand that freedom, perhaps we can consider history again. In the history of Christianity, for example, immediately after the crucifixion of Jesus, many of the first Christians thought that Christ was going to return within their lifetime. Some thought it was going to happen very soon, others thought it might be further along, but the point is that it was unclear, so they had to be constantly on the lookout, ready, prepared, waiting - and this was their work. And because this was their work - to be constantly prepared as individuals - this would have taken up a good deal of their energy. Similar situations arose in the first centuries of Islam, where messianic claims caused confusion and distraction within the Muslim community. In this Dispensation however, by specifically telling the Bahá'ís that no Manifestation of God will come for at least 1,000 years, Bahá'u'lláh has given the Bahá'í Community the mental freedom to pursue the work that He has asked us to do, without worrying about whether or not we're going to have to face the test of 'recognising' the next Manifestation of God in our lifetime. And when someone does claim to be a Prophet or Messiah, as many have done and continue to do, we can simply wish them well and continue on with our work, but we don't have to wrestle with wondering about whether or not that particular person might be true and whether or not we should follow them. When 1,000 years is up, then we can start to worry about that. But for now, we can rest assured, that as long as we are carrying out the work that Bahá'u'lláh has set out for us, building His civilisation and following the guidance of His House of Justice, we can rest assured that we are on the right path - and this gives us the freedom to pursue that work with a kind of assurance and peace in our hearts that was never granted to the believers of previous Dispensations.

The third Statement of Bahá'u'lláh, the third 'seed' that He planted in the Garden of Ridvan, was the abolition of the concept of 'spiritual impurity' and this too represented the beginning of a new culture, a culture of inclusiveness and of the universal sacredness and beauty of all human beings. Throughout history, the concept of 'spiritual impurity' had been a concern for many communities. For example, the ancient Jews, as the trustees of God's Revelation to Moses, needed to be very careful about who was included in their community so that the Torah would be protected for posterity. The early Christians too were taught to have firm boundaries between their own community and non-Christians. And in Islam, certain people - pagans & polytheists - were considered as 'spiritually impure' and were not to be associated with. Bahá'u'lláh, referring to this 3rd Statement He made at Ridvan, later wrote in the *Kitab-i-Aqdas* *"Verily, all created things were immersed in the sea of purification when, on that first day of Ridván, We shed upon the whole of creation the splendors of Our most excellent Names and Our most exalted Attributes. This, verily, is a token*

of My loving providence, which hath encompassed all the worlds. Consort ye then with the followers of all religions, and proclaim ye the Cause of your Lord, the Most Compassionate.” This 3rd ‘seed’ that Bahá’u’lláh ‘planted’ at Ridvan was the notion that every human being is sacred, regardless of what they believe. The mere fact that they exist means that they are sacred creations of God, born with the capacity to reflect His Names and Attributes.

These 3 ‘seeds’ that Bahá’u’lláh ‘planted’ into the ‘garden’ of humanity in 1863 are the seeds of the civilisation that we are cultivating: a civilisation of non-violence; a civilisation of focused, purposeful work; a civilisation of inclusiveness and the sacredness and beauty of every human being. At Naw Ruz this year, the development of this civilisation reached a new level of maturity through the decision by the Universal House of Justice to implement the Badí Calendar across the worldwide Bahá’í community. Throughout history, humanity has had many calendars, based on a wide range of cultures and religions. In this Dispensation, humanity has, for the first time, received the specific details of a calendar directly from the Mouthpiece of God. One element of this calendar is the pattern of 19-year cycles which the Báb called ‘Vahids’ or ‘Unities’. The concept of a 19-year cycle has been known for thousands of years to astronomers. The astronomers of Ancient Greece observed that the relationship between the sun, the moon and the earth follows a cycle of 19 years. At the beginning of every 19-Year Cycle, the sun, the moon and the earth are aligned in the same position every time. When we consider the details of the Badí Calendar, we begin to realise that the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh have not merely devised some arbitrary calendar and imposed it upon humanity, but they have, in fact, revealed the calendar of creation itself, totally in harmony with the natural cycles of the physical universe. On Naw Ruz of 2015 - the beginning of the 10th Vahid - the sun, the moon and the earth were aligned in the very same position in which they were aligned at the beginning of every previous 19-Year Cycle, all the way back to Naw Ruz 1844, the year of the Declaration of the Báb. For this reason, this year is perhaps a fitting moment to look back over the last 9 Vahids and to reflect on how the seeds Bahá’u’lláh planted in the Garden of Ridvan have grown and flourished.

The 1st Vahid - which lasted from Naw Ruz 1844 until Naw Ruz 1863 - consisted of the entire Dispensation of the Báb. Never before in the world’s spiritual history had all the intensity, drama and potency of an entire era between one independent Manifestation of God and the next been so condensed into such a brief and concentrated period of time. This 19-year period witnessed the Declaration of the Báb, His public proclamation in the Centre of the Islamic World and His Martyrdom. It included the secret beginnings of Bahá’u’lláh’s Mission as well as the birth of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, that unique Being described by Bahá’u’lláh as ‘The Mystery of God’. It was in this 19-year period that the world received such precious gifts as the Book of Certitude, the Hidden Words and many other Writings which immediately began to exert their influence on the course of human history.

The 2nd Vahid - from Naw Ruz 1863 until Naw Ruz 1882 - opened with the Declaration of Bahá’u’lláh in the Garden of Ridvan - the planting of those ‘seeds’ of a new civilization. This 2nd 19-Year Cycle included Bahá’u’lláh’s Proclamation to the Rulers of the World, His exile to the Holy Land in fulfilment of ancient prophecy, and the Revelation of His Charter of World Civilisation, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas.

The 3rd Vahid - from 1882 to 1901 - witnessed continuous revelation of the Word of God, including the Tablet of Carmel which laid the foundation for the development of the Bahá’í World Centre in the Holy Land. This 3rd 19-Year Period saw the first publication of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, making the original Arabic text of The Most Holy Book publicly available to humanity for the first time. It witnessed the Ascension of Bahá’u’lláh, the Appointment of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the Centre of His Covenant, and the Revelation of the Covenant itself, described by the Master as the pivot of the oneness of mankind.

In the 4th Vahid - from 1901 to 1920 - The Head of the Cause of God, for the first time since its beginnings, was granted an unprecedented level of freedom, through the release, after 40 years of imprisonment, of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. This 19-Year-Period included The Master’s travels to the West, spreading the Bahá’í Cause throughout Europe and North America, and the Revelation of The Tablets of The Divine Plan.

The 5th Vahid - from 1920 to 1939 - began almost immediately with the Ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, marking the close of the Heroic Age of the Faith and the commencement of its Formative Age through the appointment of Shoghi Effendi as Guardian of the Cause of God. This 5th 19-Year Cycle marked the beginning of the global unfoldment of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Divine Plan. It saw the formation of the first National Spiritual Assemblies and the recognition, through a court ruling in Egypt, of the independence of the Bahá’í Faith as a distinct world religion, completely independent of the Islamic society in which it was born.

By the end of **the 6th Vahid**, 1939 to 1958, under the direction of Shoghi Effendi, the construction of both the Chicago House of Worship - the Mother Temple of the West - and the Shrine of the Báb in the East had been completed, and the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh, in less than 100 years of its existence, had been established in over 250 countries and territories.

The 7th Vahid, 1958 to 1977 - saw the successful completion of the 10-Year Crusade, the largest organised plan that the Bahá'í Community had ever embarked on, and the establishment, exactly 100 years after Bahá'u'lláh's Declaration in the Garden of Ridvan, of His Universal House of Justice. This 7th Cycle also witnessed the creation of the Continental Board of Counsellors and the construction of four more Continental Houses of Worship in Africa, Australia, Europe and Latin America.

In the 8th Vahid - which lasted from 1977 to 1996 - the Universal House of Justice launched three more successive global Plans which resulted in the completion of two more Continental Houses of Worship: one in the Pacific and one in India, the latter now welcoming through its doors an average of 10,000 visitors per day and 4 million per year. During this 8th 19-Year Cycle, the House of Justice established its permanent seat on Mount Carmel and published an official English translation of the Kitab-i-Aqdas, making that 'Charter of World Civilisation' available in its entirety for the first time to the English-speaking world, a population of about half a billion people.

Naw Ruz of 1996 signalled the beginning of the **9th Vahid**, and at Ridvan of that year the Bahá'í Community began a new stage in the unfoldment of the Divine Plan. In The Tablets of the Divine Plan, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had laid down the necessity of creating 'schools of instruction' for believers all over the world to learn how to translate their understanding of the Faith into practical acts of service that would rebuild society from the ground up. In this 9th Vahid, The Universal House of Justice deemed that the time had come to begin this stage of the Divine Plan and called on the Bahá'í Community to create 'training institutes' in fulfilment of the Master's wish. It is therefore important for each of us to remember that every time we attend our study circles and put into practice the skills we are learning, we are actively fulfilling the specific provisions of the Divine Plan laid down by 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself.

The setting of the sun in Tehran on March 20th 2015 signalled the close of the **9th 19-Year Cycle of the Bahá'í Era** and the beginning of the **10th**. That moment brought the unity of the Bahá'í Community to a new level, through the universal implementation of the Badí Calendar. Whereas until that moment, the Bahá'ís of the East and the Bahá'ís of the West had followed a slightly different pattern of annual life, commemorating certain Holy Days according to slightly different criteria, as of the moment when the sun dipped below the horizon in Tehran on March 20th 2015 - the moment when the sun, the moon and the earth lined up in the same position in which they had stood on Naw Ruz 1844 - the entire worldwide body of the Bahá'í Community now follows one united pattern in its remembrance of the Central Figures of the Faith, its commemoration of Their lives, and its celebration of God's infinite grace.

As we now look ahead to the unfoldment of this **10th Vahid**, we might reflect on some words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá which express the simple motivating essence of the work that drives forward the growth and development and evolution of those 'seeds' of a new civilisation which Bahá'u'lláh planted in the soil of the Garden of Paradise in 1863:

"God has given man a heart and the heart must have some attachment. We have proved that nothing is completely worthy of our heart's devotion save reality, for all else is destined to perish. Therefore the heart is never at rest and never finds real joy and happiness until it attaches itself to the eternal. How foolish the bird that builds its nest in a tree that may perish when it could build its nest in an ever-verdant garden of paradise... Attach your hearts to Bahá'u'lláh. He is the eternal glory. Then from day to day you will become more enlightened; day by day your efforts will increase; day by day your work will become universal, and day by day your horizons will broaden until in the end they will embrace the universe."