

# ルビ・インスティテュートと地球時代における地域社会資産の再生

## The Ruhi Institute and the Regeneration of Community Assets in our Global Age

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この発表では、地球規模の技術的・物質的つながりにおける先例のない発展に伴う地域社会生活の崩壊と消滅の問題を取り上げる。「リスクを背負う子供委員会」(2003)の「権威的地域社会」の必要性と「資産開発」運動「探求研究所」(2003年～現在)の必要性という概念を基に、この発表では、社会の状態の分析に関するバハイの原則と、それらの原則がバハイ共同体生活に現在どのように適用されているかについて考察する。精神的・社会的・文化的発展のための人的資源の開発に関するルビ・インスティテュートの広範囲なアプローチと影響に主な焦点をあてる。また、ルビ・トレーニング・インスティテュートが活発に発展している例と統計データを日本及び世界各地より取り上げる。

This presentation will address the problem of the breakdown and disappearance of local community life in the face of unprecedented advances in global technological and material connectedness. Drawing on the concepts of the need for “authoritative communities” of the Commission for Children at Risk (2003) and the “assets development” movement Search Institute (2003 to present), this presentation will discuss the Baha’i principles related to the analysis of social conditions, how they are applied currently in Baha’i community life. The central focus will be on the broader approach and impact of the Ruhi Institute for training human resources for spiritual, social and cultural development. Examples and statistics will be drawn from Japan and various places around the world where active Ruhi Training Institutes are evolving.

### **Introduction:**

How can the betterment of the world be accomplished? Those of you who have taken even the first step in the Ruhi Institute study courses will be familiar with Baha’u’llah’s brief answer to this profound question. “The betterment of the world can be accomplished through pure and goodly deeds, through praiseworthy and upright conduct.” The implication of this response is that the power to make the world a better place resides within each of us, in whatever circumstance we find ourselves.

Political action, social movements, scientific or philosophical trends, even movements that are religious in nature, all come down to the actions of individuals and the decisions that are made within each person about which deeds are “goodly,” what particular patterns of conduct are to be considered “praiseworthy” and “upright.” To clarify, let us recall some of the deeds specifically mentioned in the Writings of Baha’u’llah:

*“The Great Being saith: O children of men! The fundamental purpose animating the Faith of God and His Religion is to safeguard the interests and promote the unity of the human race and to foster a spirit of love and fellowship amongst men...”*

*“Now is the time to cheer and refresh the down-cast through the invigorating breeze of love and fellowship and the living waters of friendliness and charity.”*

*“Forget your own selves and turn your eyes toward your neighbor. Bend your energies to whatever may foster the education of men.”*

*“Be generous in prosperity, and thankful in adversity. Be worthy of the trust of thy neighbor. Look upon him with a bright and friendly face...”(Baha’u’llah)*

So -- love, fellowship, neighborliness, sharing, teaching -- is that all there is to it?

Today I would like to share with you some perspectives on what neuroscientists and social scientists are learning about how profoundly these simple acts affect each of us as human beings, and how deprivation of this “breeze of love” and “living waters of friendliness” leads to our deterioration and our worst human behavior. Then I would like to show that the knowledge, skills and attitudes focused on in the Ruhi Institute training courses are a directly connected to the regeneration of individual and community life.

### **The problem of social dissolution:**

In previous Association for Baha’i Studies Conferences I have mentioned the work of the Commission for Children at Risk, and their 2003 report entitled “Hardwired to Connect.” To briefly review, 33 top researchers in fields ranging from neuroscience, biochemistry, medicine as well as the fields of social sciences and education looked deeply into the reasons for which young people in America are experiencing such high rates of mental illness, depression, delinquency and basically “failure to thrive” in the presence of unprecedented material advancement and wealth. The research showed that one out of four young people are currently at risk for failure in one form or another due to psychological, social or educational factors. The models of “treatment” can in no way keep up with the increasing demand in the rising epidemic of problems. The researchers suggest that a new model of community life is needed that can result in the prevention of these difficulties across all levels of the population.

I will come back to that in a few minutes, but I’d like to mention that these problems are in no way limited to the US. The statistics from the United Nations show similar problems across the globe, but these problems are overshadowed by even greater concerns listed in the UN’s Millennium Development Goals for developing countries such as extreme poverty and hunger, the need to ensure basic primary education, the need to empower women and achieve gender equality, the need to combat AIDS, malaria and other diseases and improve infant and maternal health, all the while dealing with wars, genocide, ecological distress and disasters, as well as corruption and incompetence in the governing bodies of nations great and small. These are but a few of the examples that call to mind Shoghi Effendi’s dire predictions in the memorable opening lines of *The Promised Day has Come*:

“A tempest, unprecedented in its violence, unpredictable in its course, catastrophic in its immediate effects, unimaginably glorious in its ultimate consequences, is at present sweeping the face of the earth. Its driving power is remorselessly gaining in range and momentum. Its cleansing force, however much undetected, is increasing with every passing day. Humanity, gripped in the clutches of its devastating power, is smitten by the evidences of its resistless fury. It can neither perceive its origin, nor probe its significance, nor discern its outcome. Bewildered, agonized and helpless, it watches this great and mighty wind of God invading the remotest and fairest regions of the earth, rocking its foundations, deranging its equilibrium, sundering its nations, disrupting the homes of its peoples, wasting its cities, driving into exile its kings, pulling down its bulwarks, uprooting its institutions, dimming its light, and harrowing up the souls of its inhabitants.”

So we are rather like the frogs sitting in a pot of water that is heating up. We might have been comfortable at first with a little bit of the heat of looser social organization, but it seems that we have lost our ability to tell how hot is too hot. And if we think it IS too hot, do we opt for “revolution” (turning back to old ways) or “evolution” (turning outward and onward). If “evolution,” then, evolving toward what vision? People in stressful or

fear-producing situations unconsciously resort to one of two reactions: *fight or flight*. Early in the last century, Japan tried “fight” and when that did not work, it seems that the general coping strategy for this generation is “flight.” The “flight” response is shown in the rising numbers of school refusers, NEETS, and reclusive responses of the so-called “hikikomori” among the younger generation. Among adults and elderly suicide rates are among the world’s highest and although the official estimate of mental illness is “suspiciously” low (about 5% -- about 1 in 20 people), it has been estimated as high as 25%. It has also been reported by Zwillich (2004) that Japan also consumes the most benzodiazepines -- drugs used to reduce anxiety --that is, more tranquilizers per person per day are taken in Japan than in any other nation in the world. Even the healthy are reluctant to become acquainted with their neighbors. Over half of the Japanese population now lives alone. People live and work in parallel, but for the most part often in social isolation. The population is in serious decline due to the low and late marriage rates (among other causes.) My own research shows that one in six students at the junior high school level have no one to talk to about things that matter to them – not a sibling, not a friend, not a parent or teacher. (Higgins, 2004) And while the world of technology has achieved the ability to connect people seamlessly and often wirelessly locally and globally, we are still bewildered with our “fax-to-fax” or “screen-to-screen” communication rather than “face-to-face” and “soul-to-soul” relationships.

### **The Search for Solutions:**

What is the Baha’i Community offering in the face of these dire circumstances? Training Institutes focusing on the development of human resources. Some people might well ask how participating in a series of study circles can possibly begin to turn this tide of social dissolution around. To answer that I’d like to review some of the solutions that are suggested by the researchers I have mentioned. The Commission for Children at Risk built a scientific case for their conclusion that specific kinds of communities need to be developed. Their report summarizes their main “planks” or foundations for their conclusions including the fact that the brain is biologically organized to learn through its attachment to other people. If we experience a nurturing environment, our brain circuitry grows and our genetic transcription improves. Without an adequately nurturing social environment, the circuitry is stunted and, surprisingly, the genes are damaged causing difficulty not only for the individual – but also his or her offspring. The neuroscience research is proving that right down to the cellular level, experiences of care and concern bring out the oxytocin – the chemical of LOVE. And oxytocin is needed to mediate the flight/fight tendency in the lower brain systems in order to allow the higher functioning of the cells to continue to progress. At the psychological and social level it is shown that attachment to others is fundamental for moral development. In other words we learn what is right or wrong through our attachment to people from our earliest infancy, and later in childhood and adolescence this involves the capacity to idealize individuals and ideas. Risk-taking and novelty-seeking that is associated with youth are connected to changes in brain structure and function that happen when there is insufficient attachment. In addition, young people need objects of “spiritual attachment” – which is why they often seek out “idols” “popstars,” “sports heroes” and the like in order to have something to “idealize.” Religiosity and spirituality have been shown to significantly influence well-being. (That is, religious and spiritual experiences feed the brain’s quest for meaning and ideals, and its yearning to explore ultimate answers about life. The sort of religious experiences which are damaging are those that are dogmatic, that advocate a faith based on “blind imitation” rather than independent investigation, and those which advocate extreme exclusion of “others”.)

My time is too short to go into more detail. But you may want to follow up and do your own investigation of this research. In short, the group who published the report “Hardwired to Connect” concluded that what is missing in the lives of today’s youth is

connectedness: connection to other people and “deep connections” to spiritual meaning. In order to remedy the violence, the depression, and other risk factors we need new kinds of social interactions, and what they called “Authoritative Communities.” The qualities of “authoritative communities” are listed as:

- Multi-generational communities including children and youth that
- Treat children as ends in themselves (appreciated at each stage), are
- Warm and nurturing,
- Establish clear guidelines and expectations
- Have a long-term focus. In such communities
- Core work done by non-specialists  
(community tasks are not carried out by professionals only, but also volunteers and people who just plain care...).
- Such communities encourage spiritual and religious development.
- Reflect and transmit a shared understanding of what it means to be a good person.
- Reflect an orientation to equal dignity of all people and to the principle of love of neighbor.

I have said before that it appears to me that these are exactly the kind of qualities that are promoted in our Baha’i communities and trained by the Ruhi Institute. It is the focus on a warm and nurturing, multi-age/multi-generational community that fosters a positive moral and spiritual understanding of the purpose of life, that safeguards and enables the higher-order function of our brains and promotes our well-being in adults and children.

Added to this research is the work of the Search Institute, which I have written about in the ABS newsletter and mentioned in previous meetings. Briefly to recap their main points, the composite findings of thousands of research reports show that the following assets correlate with the positive social, emotional, academic and spiritual growth of children.

#### — External 外部から

- Support – from family, school, community
- 支援—家族、学校、地域によるもの
- Empowerment – involvement in community tasks
- 能力を伸ばす—地域の作業、仕事への関わり
- Boundaries and expectations – clear guidelines
- 境界線と期待—明確な指導
- Constructive use of time – quality & balance
- 時間の使い方の管理—質とバランス

#### — Internal 内部から

- Commitment to learning – self-initiating, learning for fun

- 学習する義務—自発的に楽しく学習する
- Positive values – honesty, caring, justice responsibility
- 良い価値観—正直さ、思いやり、公平な責任感
- Social competencies – decision-making, conflict resolution
- 社会的な能力—意思決定、問題解決
- Positive identity—self-esteem, sense of purpose, etc.
- 自己に対する自信—自己評価、目的をもつ、など

It has been noted in their research in North America that the average young person in the US has less than half of these needed assets. The biggest missing pieces are often at the community level. The research also confirms that the fewer of these assets, the greater the chances of high-risk behaviors, and social and academic problems, while qualities of leadership, health-building habits and strong academic performance are directly correlated with a higher number of assets. Our research in Japan has shown that a significant number of these assets are weak or missing for many children – especially in the areas of community empowerment; boundaries and expectations, use of time, self-initiating commitment to learning and sense of purpose. (Higgins, 2006) Baha'u'llah has noted, "Man is the supreme Talisman. Lack of a proper education hath deprived him of that which he doth inherently possess." I'll say! If we and our children are lacking the social and spiritual resources we need, no matter how well off we are materially, we have done ourselves and our children a great disservice. As Agnes Alexander used to say, "It's all about LOVE, dearie!"

I would like to mention another recently emerging line of research being done by a branch of the Search Institute called the Center for Spiritual Development. Highlights of their studies show that students improve in all areas – social, physical, psychological, academic and spiritual when they engage in religious activities on a regular basis, and even, to a slightly less degree, if they merely believe that spiritual development is very important. Their work and research can be accessed on the Center for Spiritual Development link of [searchinstitute.com](http://searchinstitute.com).

The term "empowerment" comes up in many areas of community development. In looking for a good definition of that, I thought Wikipedia did as good a job as I'd seen in describing the elements of "empowerment."

Empowerment is probably the totality of the following or similar capabilities:-

- \* Having decision-making power of one's own
- \* Having access to information and resources for taking proper decision
- \* Having a range of options from which you can make choices (not just yes/no, either/or.)
- \* Ability to exercise assertiveness in collective decision making
- \* Having positive thinking on the ability to make change
- \* Ability to learn skills for improving one's personal or group power.
- \* Ability to change others' perceptions by democratic means.
- \* Involving in the growth process and changes that is never ending and self-initiated
- \* Increasing one's positive self-image and overcoming stigma
- \* Increasing ones ability in discreet thinking to sort out right and wrong

To come to our point, let us make note of how the Ruhi Institute study courses empower people socially and spiritually, in ways that increase the assets of fellowship, love, service and education in order to become positive agents of change in communities around the world.

Book 1: Teaches people to develop the habit of reading and pondering the sacred Writings on a regular basis for themselves. It leads them to consider their own perspectives, and options in the presence of the highest standard of beauty, love, and truth that their hearts and minds will encounter. The study circle itself gives them a positive and nurturing atmosphere in which to practice consultation and exchanging ideas. It models positive thinking and provides skills for overcoming the tendencies of the lower nature for “fight” or “flight.” Practicum components include simple acts of prayer, of visiting neighbors and friends, and preparing “spiritual nourishment” for themselves and others in the form of devotional meetings. The brain research done on the practices of prayer and meditation alone indicate that these activities can release the chemicals in the brain which mediate the negative effects of stress and aggression. They can regulate and calm brain-wave patterns apparently even at a distance. The “magnetic” effects of such words and thoughts of beauty create conditions of attraction within the heart of the participants that facilitate bonds of fellowship.

Book 2: Raises the standards of our daily discussions to the level of principles. The practice of visiting seekers or friends in order to carry on meaning-full conversations, stimulates the high-order thinking of the brain and reinforces and revitalizes the bonds of fellowship that are so needed in community life.

Books 3, 3a and 5 acquaint or reacquaint the members of the community with their role as moral models, mentors and educators of children and youth. The more adults reach out to the children and youth in their neighborhoods and communities, the more assets we provide that are protectors and promoters of proper education of the young people (who, may I remind you, will make the decisions about what kind of “nursing homes” we’ll have in the future!) Youth not only find new ways to engage in learning, but become participants in community activities that enable them to explore through creative experience their various developing talents as well as their sense of purpose. It is no wonder that Baha’i youth are often seen as positively different than others. Their asset levels are higher!

Book 4: is one of the best-loved books because it acquaints us with the history and biographical sagas of crisis and victory that strengthen our ability to find meaning in this chaotic period in the history of man. As Grant Hindin Miller and others have pointed out, it is the stories and the arts which connect and ignite our souls in the flow of history.

Book 6: empowers us to take on the most precious task as the torch-bearers of meaning to those we meet as we carry forward a spiritually and materially advancing civilization. We learn to teach in both individual and community settings.

Book 7: encourages and empowers us to prepare to take on any of various roles in the core work of a spiritually developing community, and to become part of a community development process that is self-initiating and sustainable through consultation, action and reflection. As arts are encouraged throughout the institute process and the core activities of the community, doors of creative activity open and amazing and inspirational results appear. While the spirit of fellowship generated within our fellow study-circle members brings out the oxytocin, serotonin, another positive brain chemical that is released when one is connected with artistic and creative processes.

### **A Simple Survey of Ruhi Participants:**

Although we know that growing numbers of people around the world are involved in study circles and other core activities, the published data on the effects that I have come across are mostly anecdotal. It may take some time to see clearly the “statistical” effects on

the wider community. However, in the interest of exploring the experiences of Japanese friends who have experienced the Ruhi Institute in its “neo-natal” form in Japan, I carried out an informal survey of friends at the Western Baha’i Summer School last month. Twenty-six people answered a short questionnaire, 13 in Japanese and 13 in English; 10 men and 16 women. Fourteen had finished Book 7, 4 had finished Book 6, 3 had done Book 4, and 3 others, Book 3. One each had done Books 1 and 2. They had been involved in study circles for periods of time ranging from three to ten years. Of the 14 Book 7 graduates, 11 of them had held more than 10 devotional meetings. Of the other 12 participants in the survey, 6 had held between 2 and 10 devotional meetings, while the remaining 6 (1 each of the various graduates) had not held devotional meetings. Ten people had held more than 10 children’s classes, while eleven people had held between 2 and 10 such classes. The three respondents who had not held children’s classes included one Book 7 graduate, and the two who had not yet taken Book 3. As for junior youth activities, 10 people had never been involved with these, while 16 had been involved including 6 who had helped out in junior youth and youth activities at least ten times. Of the Book 7 graduates, 6 had facilitated more than 10 study circles, 7 had facilitated between 2 to 10 and only one had not facilitated.

I also asked the participants to self-report their “before and after” experiences on a number of activities that are considered “goodly” deeds from a Baha’i perspective. They responded on a 4 point scale with 1 meaning “little or none,” 2 meaning “some, but not much;” 3 = “quite a bit,” and 4 = “very much.” The average scores can be seen in the following table:

	Before	After
Know the people in your neighborhood :	1.60	2.16
Interact with children in your area:	1.75	2.36
Interact with youth in your area:	1.80	2.00
Interact with adults in your area:	1.99	2.20
Greet people you have not yet met	2.00	2.90
Initiate conversations with people	2.20	3.00
Chat about topics/Baha’i principles	2.10	2.80
Help others when they need help	1.60	2.70
Volunteer in the neighborhood or town	1.60	2.30
Other friendship-building activities	1.90	2.80

These gains are quite modest, but considering how humble a start they indicate, they may actually be significant. (The sample is a bit too small and uneven to say for sure. ) But the trend is positive. Some people commented that they had not noticed any behavioral change, although their understanding and love for God deepened. Others also indicated

changes in attitudes: one mentioned thinking more about other people’s souls, another that they were more aware of other people’s needs, three mentioned that they were more confident in teaching and sharing Baha’i principles and ideas. Behavioral changes that were mentioned by the participants in the comments section included more conscious effort to interact with children, junior youth, neighbors and friends. One said that had actually come to enjoy communicating with neighborhood children. One mentioned cooperating more with others, and another specifically said they now volunteer often. Several mentioned that they had found the concise teaching practices such as Anna’s presentation made them able to share their knowledge with others. Even one Book 7 graduate who said they had not changed in feeling, understanding or confidence, admits that the number of conscious service actions, assistance to others and sharing knowledge has grown.

I like to tell people that this is just the “infancy” of the institute. A Ruhi Book is nothing but a 2-dimensional representation of a five-dimensional process. As we bring it into the realm of practice, we are learning to add the dimensions or knowledge, of reflection,

of arts and actions in our social settings that draw down the divine rain of love and understanding. Do remember what the Beloved Master, Abdu'l Baha has written concerning Japan ninety years ago:

“The people of Japan are like unto a soil that has been deprived of rain for cycles and generations and has had no share of the outpouring of rain and even of dew. Certainly it is quite athirst. Nbow thou shouldst become a divine gardener and should satisfy that thirstly soil with the water of divine teachings, so that heavenly bounties may be poured out and the flowers of reality and fragrant herbs of human perfections spring forth and that land turn into a paradise of Eden.” (Japan Will Turn Ablaze, Dec. 18, 1918)

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