

Study Guide To The Letter On Economic Life

Susan Gammage

THE UNIVERSAL HOUSE OF JUSTICE

1 March 2017

To the Bahá'ís of the World

Dearly loved Friends,

Paragraph One

In an increasingly interconnected world, more light is being cast on the social conditions of every people, giving greater visibility to their circumstances. While there are developments that give hope, there is much that should weigh heavy on the conscience of the human race. Inequity, discrimination, and exploitation blight the life of humanity, seemingly immune to the treatments applied by political schemes of every hue. The economic impact of these afflictions has resulted in the prolonged suffering of so many, as well as in deep-seated, structural defects in society. No one whose heart has been attracted to the teachings of the Blessed Beauty can remain unmoved by these consequences. "The world is in great turmoil," Bahá'u'lláh observes in the Lawḥ-i-Dunyá, "and the minds of its people are in a state of utter confusion. We entreat the Almighty that He may graciously illuminate them with the glory of His Justice, and enable them to discover that which will be profitable unto them at all times and under all conditions." As the Bahá'í community strives to contribute at the level of thought and action to the betterment of the world, the adverse conditions experienced by many populations will more and more demand its attention.

Questions and Answers from the Quote:

Why is more light being cast on the social conditions of every people now?

- We live in an increasingly interconnected world

What are we seeing as a result?

- greater visibility to their circumstances.

What should weigh heavily on the conscience of the human race?

- Inequity
- Discrimination
- Exploitation

How are these 3 issues described?

- a blight on the life of humanity

What do they seem to be immune to?

- the treatments applied by political schemes of every hue.

What has the economic impact of these afflictions resulted in?

- the prolonged suffering of so many
- deep-seated, structural defects in society

How are Bahá'ís being asked to respond?

- No one can remain unmoved by these consequences

How is the world reacting now?

- the minds of its people are in a state of utter confusion.

What will help?

- We entreat the Almighty that He may graciously illuminate them with the glory of His Justice, and
- enable them to discover that which will be profitable unto them at all times and under all conditions

As the adverse conditions experienced by many populations demands more and more of our attention, how is the Bahá'í community being asked to respond?

- strive to contribute to the betterment of the world at the level of thought and action

Questions for Reflection:

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of an increasingly interconnected world, which gives greater visibility to people's circumstances?
2. What political schemes have been tried to address the issues of inequity, discrimination and exploitation, and why didn't they work?
3. What are some of the deep-seated structural defects causing an economic impact?
4. Which prayers would you like to use to beseech God to graciously illuminate them with the glory of His Justice?
5. When and how will you say them?
6. How will you know what is profitable to you in any given moment?

7. What would this look like if we were able to achieve it?
8. What steps can we as individuals take?
9. How does what's being asked of us differ from our own inclinations?

Now: Summarize the paragraph in a sentence or two.

Paragraph Two

The welfare of any segment of humanity is inextricably bound up with the welfare of the whole. Humanity's collective life suffers when any one group thinks of its own well-being in isolation from that of its neighbours or pursues economic gain without regard for how the natural environment, which provides sustenance for all, is affected. A stubborn obstruction, then, stands in the way of meaningful social progress: time and again, avarice and self-interest prevail at the expense of the common good. Unconscionable quantities of wealth are being amassed, and the instability this creates is made worse by how income and opportunity are spread so unevenly both between nations and within nations. But it need not be so. However much such conditions are the outcome of history, they do not have to define the future, and even if current approaches to economic life satisfied humanity's stage of adolescence, they are certainly inadequate for its dawning age of maturity. There is no justification for continuing to perpetuate structures, rules, and systems that manifestly fail to serve the interests of all peoples. The teachings of the Faith leave no room for doubt: there is an inherent moral dimension to the generation, distribution, and utilization of wealth and resources.

Questions and Answers from the Quote:

The welfare of any segment of humanity is inextricably bound up with what?

- the welfare of the whole.

When any one group thinks of its own well-being how does humanity's collective life suffer?

- When it is in isolation from considering the well-being of its neighbours
- When it pursues economic gain without regard for how the natural environment, which provides sustenance for all, is affected

Which stubborn obstruction stands in the way of meaningful social progress?

- time and again, avarice and self-interest prevail at the expense of the common good.

What happens when unconscionable quantities of wealth are being amassed?

- It creates instability

When and how is it made worse?

- When income and opportunity are spread unevenly both between nations and within nations.

There is no justification for continuing to perpetuate structures, rules, and systems that manifestly fail to serve the interests of all peoples.

The teachings of the Faith leave no room for doubt: there is an inherent moral dimension to the generation, distribution, and utilization of wealth and resources.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What is the inherent moral dimension to the generation, distribution, and utilization of wealth and resources?
2. What are some examples of income and opportunity being spread unevenly between nations? Within nations?
3. Even though such conditions are the outcome of history, why don't they have to define the future?
4. What are the current approaches to economic life that are satisfying humanity's stage of adolescence?
5. Why are these approaches inadequate for humanity's dawning age of maturity?

Now: Summarize the paragraph in a sentence or two.

Paragraph Three

The stresses emerging out of the long-term process of transition from a divided world to a united one are being felt within international relations as much as in the deepening fractures that affect societies large and small. With prevailing modes of thought found to be badly wanting, the world is in desperate need of a shared ethic, a sure framework for addressing the crises that gather like storm clouds. The vision of Bahá'u'lláh challenges many of the assumptions that are allowed to shape contemporary discourse—for instance, that self-interest, far from needing to be restrained, drives prosperity, and that progress depends upon its expression through relentless competition. To view the worth of an individual chiefly in terms of how much one can accumulate and how many goods one can consume relative to others is wholly alien to Bahá'í thought. But neither are the teachings in sympathy with sweeping dismissals of wealth as inherently distasteful or immoral, and asceticism is prohibited. Wealth must serve humanity. Its use must accord with spiritual principles; systems must be created in their light. And, in Bahá'u'lláh's memorable words, "No light can compare with the light of justice. The establishment of order in the world and the tranquillity of the nations depend upon it."

Questions and Answers from the Quote:

Where are the stresses emerging out of the long-term process of transition from a divided world to a united one being felt?

- within international relations
- in the deepening fractures that affect societies large and small.

What does the world desperately need?

- a shared ethic
- a sure framework for addressing the crises that gather like storm clouds.

What assumptions that are allowed to shape contemporary discourse does the vision of Bahá'u'lláh challenge?

- that self-interest, far from needing to be restrained, drives prosperity
- that progress depends upon its expression through relentless competition.

What is wholly alien to Bahá'í thought?

- To view the worth of an individual chiefly in terms of
 - how much one can accumulate
 - how many goods one can consume relative to others.

Do Bahá'ís dismiss wealth as inherently distasteful or immoral?

- But neither are the teachings in sympathy with sweeping dismissals of wealth as inherently distasteful or immoral, and asceticism is prohibited.

What is the purpose of wealth?

- Wealth must serve humanity.
- Its use must accord with spiritual principles
- systems must be created to align with spiritual principles

What does the establishment of order in the world and the tranquillity of the nations depend on?

- the light of justice

Questions for Reflection:

1. What would a shared ethic look like?
2. What's an example of a system of wealth aligned with spiritual principles?

Now: Summarize the paragraph in a sentence or two.

Paragraph Four

Although Bahá'u'lláh does not set out in His Revelation a detailed economic system, a constant theme throughout the entire corpus of His teachings is the reorganization of human society. Consideration of this theme inevitably gives rise to questions of economics. Of course, the future order conceived by Bahá'u'lláh is far beyond anything that can be imagined by the present generation. Nevertheless, its eventual emergence will depend on strenuous effort by His followers to put His teachings into effect today. With this in mind, we hope that the comments below will stimulate thoughtful, ongoing reflection by the friends. The aim is to learn about how to participate in the material affairs of society in a way that is consistent with the divine precepts and how, in practical terms, collective prosperity can be advanced through justice and generosity, collaboration and mutual assistance.

Questions and Answers from the Quote:

What is a constant theme throughout the entire corpus of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings?

- the reorganization of human society

Consideration of this theme inevitably gives rise to questions of economics. Of course,

What will the future order conceived by Bahá'u'lláh look like?

- It is far beyond anything that can be imagined by the present generation.

How will it come into being?

- Its eventual emergence will depend on strenuous effort by His followers to put His teachings into effect today.

What does the House of Justice want us to do with this letter?

- stimulate thoughtful, ongoing reflection
- learn how to participate in the material affairs of society in a way that is consistent with the divine precepts

Questions for Reflection:

1. How can collective prosperity be advanced through justice and generosity, in practical terms?
2. How can collective prosperity be advanced through collaboration and mutual assistance, in practical terms?

Now: Summarize the paragraph in a sentence or two.

Paragraph Five

Our call to examine the implications of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh for economic life is intended to reach Bahá'í institutions and communities but is directed more especially to the individual believer. If a new model of community life, patterned on the teachings, is to emerge, must not the company of the faithful demonstrate in their own lives the rectitude of conduct that is one of its most distinguishing features? Every choice a Bahá'í makes—as employee or employer, producer or consumer, borrower or lender, benefactor or beneficiary—leaves a trace, and the moral duty to lead a coherent life demands that one's economic decisions be in accordance with lofty ideals, that the purity of one's aims be matched by the purity of one's actions to fulfil those aims. Naturally, the friends habitually look to the teachings to set the standard to which to aspire. But the community's deepening engagement with society means that the economic dimension of social existence must receive ever more concentrated attention. Particularly in clusters where the community-building process is beginning to embrace large numbers, the exhortations contained in the Bahá'í Writings should increasingly inform economic relationships within families, neighbourhoods, and peoples. Not content with whatever values prevail in the existing order that surrounds them, the friends everywhere should consider the application of the teachings to their lives

and, using the opportunities their circumstances offer them, make their own individual and collective contributions to economic justice and social progress wherever they reside. Such efforts will add to a growing storehouse of knowledge in this regard.

Questions and Answers from the Quote:

Who is their call to examine the implications of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh for economic life intended to reach?

- Bahá'í institutions and communities
- more especially to the individual believer

What is needed to bring about a new model of community life, patterned on the teachings?

- For the Bahá'ís to demonstrate a rectitude of conduct in our own lives

What is the effect of our choices?

- Every choice a Bahá'í makes leaves a trace

Who does this apply to?

- employee or employer
- producer or consumer
- borrower or lender
- benefactor or beneficiary

What does our moral duty to lead a coherent life demand from us?

- that our economic decisions be in accordance with lofty ideals
- that the purity of our aims be matched by the purity of our actions to fulfil those aims

Where do we find the standard?

- Naturally, the friends habitually look to the teachings to set the standard to which to aspire

What needs more concentrated attention?

- the economic dimension of social existence must receive ever more concentrated attention

What's the reason?

- the community's deepening engagement with society

Where should the exhortations contained in the Bahá'í Writings increasingly inform economic relationships within families, neighbourhoods, and peoples?

- particularly in clusters where the community-building process is beginning to embrace large numbers

What are we being asked to reject?

- the values that prevail in the existing order that surrounds us

What are we being asked to consider?

- the application of the teachings to their lives
- using the opportunities their circumstances offer us, to make both individual and collective contributions to economic justice and social progress wherever we reside

What will be the effect of such efforts?

- Such efforts will add to a growing storehouse of knowledge in this regard

Questions for Reflection:

1. How can we demonstrate in our own lives, the rectitude of conduct that is patterned on the teachings?
2. What would living a coherent life look like?
3. What opportunities exist in your neighborhood to make an individual contribution to economic justice?
4. What opportunities exist in your neighborhood to make an individual or collective contribution to social progress?

Now: Summarize the paragraph in a sentence or two.

Paragraph Six

*A foundational concept to explore in this context is the spiritual reality of man. In the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, the nobility inherent to every human being is unequivocally asserted; it is a fundamental tenet of Bahá'í belief, upon which hope for the future of humankind is built. The soul's capacity to manifest all the names and attributes of God—He Who is the Compassionate, the Bestower, the Bountiful—is repeatedly affirmed in the Writings. Economic life is an arena for the expression of honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, generosity, and other qualities of the spirit. The individual is not merely a self-interested economic unit, striving to claim an ever-greater share of the world's material resources. "Man's merit lieth in service and virtue", Bahá'u'lláh avers, "and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches." And further: "Dissipate not the wealth of your precious lives in the pursuit of evil and corrupt affection, nor let your endeavours be spent in promoting your personal interest." By consecrating oneself to the service of others, one finds meaning and purpose in life and contributes to the upliftment of society itself. At the outset of His celebrated treatise *The Secret of Divine Civilization*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá states:*

And the honour and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world's multitudes should become a source of social good. Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that by the confirming grace of God he has become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to his fellow men? No, by the one true God, there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight.

Questions and Answers from the Quote:

What is a foundational concept to explore in this context?

- the spiritual reality of man

What is a fundamental tenet of Bahá'í belief, upon which hope for the future of humankind is built?

- the nobility inherent to every human being

What is repeatedly affirmed in the Writings?

- the soul's capacity to manifest all the names and attributes of God

What does economic life provide us an arena for the expression of?

- Honesty
- Integrity
- Trustworthiness
- Generosity
- other qualities of the spirit

What does society believe we are?

- a self-interested economic unit
- striving to claim an ever-greater share of the world's material resources

What does Bahá'u'lláh tell us we are?

- Man's merit lieth in service and virtue and not in the pageantry of wealth and riches

What does He ask us to do?

- Dissipate not the wealth of your precious lives in the pursuit of evil and corrupt affection
- Don't let your endeavours be spent in promoting your personal interest

What happens when we consecrate ourselves to the service of others?

- We find meaning and purpose in life
- We contribute to the upliftment of society itself

What does 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us about our honour and distinction?

- that we should become a source of social good among all the world's multitudes
- there is no larger bounty conceivable than to see that we have become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to our fellow men
- there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight

Questions for Reflection:

1. How does economic life provide us with an arena for the expression of (give examples for each):
 - Honesty?
 - Integrity?
 - Trustworthiness?
 - Generosity?
2. What's the problem with self-interested economic units, striving to claim an ever-greater share of the world's material resources?
3. How are you serving humanity now, and what changes would you like to make in your life, to serve humanity more selflessly?

Now: Summarize the paragraph in a sentence or two.

Paragraph Seven

Viewed in this light, many seemingly ordinary economic activities gain new significance because of their potential to add to human welfare and prosperity. "Every person must have an occupation, a trade or a craft," explains the Master, "so that he may carry other people's burdens, and not himself be a burden to others." The poor are urged by Bahá'u'lláh to "exert themselves and strive to earn the means of livelihood", while they who are possessed of riches "must have the utmost regard for the poor". "Wealth", 'Abdu'l-Bahá has affirmed, "is praiseworthy in the highest degree, if it is acquired by an individual's own efforts and the grace of God, in commerce, agriculture, art and industry, and if it be expended for philanthropic purposes." At the same time, the Hidden Words is replete with warnings of its perilous allure, that wealth is a "mighty barrier" between the believer and the proper Object of his adoration. No wonder, then, that Bahá'u'lláh extols the station of the wealthy one who is not hindered by riches from attaining the eternal kingdom; the splendour of such a soul "shall illuminate the dwellers of heaven even as the sun enlightens the people of the earth!" 'Abdu'l-Bahá declares that "if a judicious and resourceful individual should initiate measures which would universally enrich the masses of the people, there could be no undertaking greater than this, and it would rank in the sight of God as the supreme achievement". For wealth is most commendable "provided the entire population is wealthy." Examining one's life to determine what is a necessity and then discharging with joy one's obligation in relation to the law of Huqúqu'lláh is an indispensable discipline to bring one's priorities into balance, purify whatever wealth one possesses, and ensure that the share which is the Right of God provides for the greater good. At all times, contentment and moderation, benevolence and fellow feeling, sacrifice and reliance on the Almighty are qualities that befit the God-fearing soul.

Questions and Answers from the Quote:

When viewed in this light, what gains new significance because of their potential to add to human welfare and prosperity?

- many seemingly ordinary economic activities

What must everyone have?

- a trade or a craft

Why?

- so that he may carry other people's burdens, and not himself be a burden to others

What are the poor urged to do?

- exert themselves
- strive to earn the means of livelihood

In which areas are we encouraged to find work?

- commerce
- agriculture
- art
- industry

What are they who are possessed of riches urged to do?

- They must have the utmost regard for the poor

When is wealth praiseworthy in the highest degree,?

- if it is acquired by an individual's own efforts
- if it is acquired through the grace of God
- if it be expended for philanthropic purposes
- when the entire population is wealthy

What is the station of the wealthy one who is not hindered by riches?

- They'll attain the eternal kingdom
- The splendour of such a soul "shall illuminate the dwellers of heaven even as the sun enlightens the people of the earth!"

What is the greatest undertaking and ranked in the sight of God as the supreme achievement?

- if a judicious and resourceful individual should initiate measures which would universally enrich the masses of the people

What is an easy way we can bring our priorities into balance and purify whatever wealth we may possess?

- Examine our life to determine what is a necessity and then discharging with joy our obligation in relation to the law of Ḥuqúqu'lláh

What else will that ensure?

- that the share which belongs to the Right of God will provide for the greater good

What 5 qualities befit the God-fearing soul at all times?

- contentment
- moderation
- benevolence
- fellow-feeling
- sacrifice
- reliance on the Almighty

Questions for Reflection:

1. What are some examples of seemingly ordinary economic activities?
2. What prevents the poor from exerting themselves to strive to earn their means of livelihood in this economic climate?
3. How could they who are possessed of riches help the poor to exert themselves as they strive to earn their means of livelihood?
4. When is wealth a “mighty barrier” between us and God?
5. What steps can we take to make sure that wealth does not become a mighty barrier?
6. How does paying the Right of God provide for the greater good?

Now: Summarize the paragraph in a sentence or two.

Paragraph Eight

The forces of materialism promote a quite contrary line of thinking: that happiness comes from constant acquisition, that the more one has the better, that worry for the environment is for another day. These seductive messages fuel an increasingly entrenched sense of personal entitlement, which uses the language of justice and rights to disguise self-interest. Indifference to the hardship experienced by others becomes commonplace while entertainment and distracting amusements are voraciously consumed. The enervating influence of materialism seeps into every culture, and all Bahá'ís recognize that, unless they strive to remain conscious of its effects, they may to one degree or another unwittingly adopt its ways of seeing the world. Parents must be acutely aware that, even when very young, children absorb the norms of their surroundings. The junior youth spiritual empowerment programme encourages thoughtful discernment at an age when the call of materialism grows more insistent. With the approach of adulthood comes a responsibility, shared by one's generation, not to allow worldly pursuits to blind one's eyes to injustice and privation. Over time, the qualities and attitudes nurtured by the courses of the training institute, through exposure to the Word of God, help individuals to see past the illusions that, at every stage of life, the world uses to pull attention away from service and towards the self. And ultimately, the systematic study of the Word of God and the exploration of its implications raises consciousness of the need to manage one's material affairs in keeping with the divine teachings.

Questions and Answers from the Quote:

What 3 contrary lines of thinking do the forces of materialism promote?

- that happiness comes from constant acquisition

- that the more one has the better
- that worry for the environment is for another day

What do these seductive messages fuel?

- an increasingly entrenched sense of personal entitlement

What language do they use?

- the language of justice and rights

For what purpose?

- to disguise self-interest

When the language of justice and rights are used to disguise self-interest, what do these seductive messages fuel?

- an increasingly entrenched sense of personal entitlement

When entertainment and distracting amusements are voraciously consumed, what becomes commonplace?

- Indifference to the hardship experienced by others
- the enervating influence of materialism seeps into every culture
- unless they strive to remain conscious of its effects, they may unwittingly adopt its ways of seeing the world

What must parents be acutely aware of?

- that, even when very young, children absorb the norms of their surroundings.

How does the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme help?

- It encourages thoughtful discernment at an age when the call of materialism grows more insistent.

What responsibility comes with the approach of adulthood?

- not to allow worldly pursuits to blind one's eyes to injustice and privation.

How does the training institute help over time?

- the qualities and attitudes nurtured by the courses of the training institute, help individuals to see past the illusions that, at every stage of life, the world uses to pull attention away from service and towards the self.

How does it do this?

- through exposure to systematic study of the Word of God, and the exploration of its implications

What are the benefits?

- It raises consciousness of the need to manage one's material affairs in keeping with the divine teachings.

Questions for Reflection:

1. What does personal entitlement look like?
2. How is the language of justice and rights used to disguise self-interest?
3. Give some examples of entertainment and distracting amusements that our society voraciously consumes.
4. How does this breed indifference to the hardship experienced by others?
5. What steps can parents take to make sure that very young children don't absorb the norms of their surroundings?
6. How do we prevent worldly pursuits from blinding our eyes to injustice and privation?
7. If you were managing your material affairs in keeping with the divine teachings, what would you need to do?

Now: Summarize the paragraph in a sentence or two.

Paragraph Nine

Beloved Friends: The extremes of wealth and poverty in the world are becoming ever more untenable. As inequity persists, so the established order is seen to be unsure of itself, and its values are being questioned. Whatever the tribulations that a conflicted world must confront in the future, we pray that the Almighty will help His loved ones to overcome every obstacle in their path and assist them to serve humanity. The larger the presence of a Bahá'í community in a population, the greater its responsibility to find ways of addressing the root causes of the poverty in its surroundings. Although the friends are at the early stages of learning about such work and of contributing to the related discourses, the community-building process of the Five Year Plan is creating everywhere the ideal environment in which to accrue knowledge and experience, gradually but consistently, about the higher purpose of economic activity. Against the background of the age-long work of erecting a divine civilization, may this exploration become a more pronounced feature of community life, institutional thought, and individual action in the years ahead.

[signed: The Universal House of Justice]

Questions and Answers from the Quote:

What is becoming ever more untenable?

- the extremes of wealth and poverty in the world

What happens as a result?

- the established order is seen to be unsure of itself
- its values are being questioned

What will help with the tribulations that a conflicted world must confront in the future?

- we pray that the Almighty will help us overcome every obstacle in our path
- we pray that the Almighty will assist us to serve humanity

What is a great responsibility when the larger the presence of a Bahá'í community in a population grows?

- to find ways of addressing the root causes of the poverty in its surroundings.

Where are we in this?

- at the early stages of learning about such work
- at the early stages of contributing to the related discourses

What is creating the ideal environment in which to accrue knowledge and experience about the higher purpose of economic activity?

- the community-building process of the Five Year Plan

At what level can this exploration of erecting a divine civilization become a more pronounced feature of?

- community life
- institutional thought
- individual action

Questions for Reflection:

1. Give examples of how the established order is seen to be unsure of itself.
2. What are the values of the established order?
3. How are these values being questioned?
4. What can the individual do to find ways of addressing the root causes of poverty in your cluster?
5. How can the community building process help address the root causes of poverty in your cluster?

Now: Summarize the paragraph in a sentence or two.

What was your favorite part of the letter? Post your comments below!

About The Author

Susan Gammage is a Bahá'í-inspired author, educator and researcher with a passion for finding ways to help people apply Bahá'í principles to everyday life situations so they can learn to “live the life”. She has published hundreds of articles and many books and nothing gives her greater pleasure than working on a whole lot more. She is blessed to be able to live in one of the most beautiful parts of Canada.

To hire her as a life coach: <https://susangammage.com/shop> or to contribute to the costs of developing and maintaining the site:
<https://susangammage.com/product-category/donations>