

November 7, 2005

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Bahá'í Black Men's Gathering
Treasurer, National Spiritual Assembly of
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My dear and noble Brother,

My desk is cluttered from all the things I had put aside in order to prepare for the first BMG-Roanoke weekend. It concluded yesterday. And I am weak, and also tearful. For I just finished beseeching and begging the Blessed Beauty to accept my service in this sacred effort.

I am still dazed by what transpired this weekend. Of course it was a victory. In your letter to us prior to the Gathering, you assured us of that victory. Yet, I doubted.

Saturday morning, with only five men present, and even while knowing that Harvey and Gordon were on their way, I felt like weeping. I slipped quietly outside the Black Culture Museum where the Gathering was going to be held in order to be alone.

All the invitations we had sent out, all the promises Black men gave about attending, all the preparations we made for these brothers in Roanoke—the most segregated and thus spiritually dark city in Virginia—seemed in vain.

I was in deep spiritual agony. I turned to my prayer book, which happened to open to the first prayer for the Triumph of this Cause. Afterwards, I repeatedly reread the letters in our folder, absorbing, as if for the first time, each word and sentence: the letter from the House of Justice, two from our NSA, and yours.

Yours, of course, was written immediately prior to our Gathering, like those you write before other Gatherings. It was unusually personal and insightful. It emphatically stated the magnitude of the mission that lay before Alfred, Marcus, and me, here in Roanoke. And it was deeply appreciated. For at that moment in my grief, my searching for answers as to why men who promised to come were failing to appear, I desperately needed those deep insights. I especially needed the assurance of your prayers and our victory. Please accept my (our) gratitude.

Still, I did not know what the grace of Bahá'u'lláh had in store for us Saturday, as well as the public devotional the next morning.

Yes, Harvey and Gordon from North Carolina, and Carol from D.C., were there to support the 3 of us. Their presence and spiritual contribution were invaluable. And because of their time and travel sacrifice, I now know we all must support each other's Gathering.

And yes, Lawrence White from West Virginia came, making him the first from that state to ever come to a Gathering. And yes, a total of 3 seekers, including a father and son, finally came on Saturday. And yes, we had excellent drumming, consultation, and devotions. But, somehow, a greater purpose for the Gathering began emerging, unfolding into a higher meaning and, thus, value. This is why I am dazed; I cannot fully explain what happened or what that meaning is. But I now know that the numbers of attendees never should have held the importance I gave it.

The Conference of Badasht came to mind only this morning during devotions; these thoughts continue to linger as I write. Although a local Gathering cannot claim a direct comparison to that religiously historic event, the Central Gathering, and now every local Gathering, represents (at least in my mind) an echo of that Conference's purpose in the ongoing transformation of mankind.

Yes, the BMG-Roanoke Gathering was numerically meager, as well as the public attendance the next morning. But now I can reply, so what? The spirit both days confirmed that our Gathering was consonant, albeit on a much smaller scale, with that higher purpose I struggle to describe—the breaking away from traditional religious belief in a spiritually dark land.

Most people will not understand this linkage with that momentous Conference. But isn't every Gathering the means by which souls of Black men are breaking from away from a cultural past of spiritual oppression? Clearly, every drum beat is a hammer against our chains; every collective mention of His sacred name is a strengthening of our uniquely weakened and fluttering wings; every prayer is a veil-removing awakening and yearning to be accepted in His Court—that spiritual reality that awaited our ancestors after being freed from slavery; and every letter we read from our beloved Institutions is an encouragement to even greater belief and action. Surely the Gathering resonates with the meanings of that Conference.

You, of all Bahá'is, know how the Gathering confirms that we, too, are spiritual beings, that we are loved for who we are, that we have a place in His Kingdom, a place not inferior to that of any race. Now, however, you, with the joy and blessings of the Universal House of Justice gladdening your heart, have set us upon a path where our newly-found faith must now be commensurately matched by steadfastness and courageous action. Other men must learn that their chains, too, can be broken; hence, the growing and strengthening of the BMG-Roanoke.

Thank you for reading these words from my heart. All praise to the Blessed Beauty for this gift, through you, of the Gathering. And please continue to keep all of us in your prayers.

Your brother,
James