

## **Creating Cooperation and Collaboration between Artists and Communities**

Suggestions from Wings to the Spirit Foundation, Inc.

The suggestions offered here to facilitate artist-community relations were compiled in response to feedback, personal accounts and questions received following the 2008 Wings to the Spirit Arts Conference. They have been written with Baha'i artists and communities in mind, however they may be equally helpful or applicable to other communities or groups. They are humbly offered. We expect them to evolve in refinement over time.

### **Issue: Cost, Value and Donation of Work to Baha'i Community – there are differences between volunteer and professional services**

**Community:** Offer remuneration. Artists are frequently asked to donate work for charitable causes both Baha'i and other. It is helpful for the requesting community to err on the side of offering to pay for time, services and materials at least. If the artist is willing and able to donate work, products, or services, he or she will surely let you know that.

A "No" should be gracefully accepted. If the artist declines, no explanation need be made.

Remember to thank the artist for work or services. Donations of materials and service are often taken for granted and the common courtesy of thanking the artist/donor is forgotten.

**Artists:** Artists of all levels of professional development should communicate expectations clearly. Artists should be organized and prepared with a schedule of costs and prices (or receipts if they need to be reimbursed) if they are charging - even at reduced rates - for products or services. The Baha'i community's requests should be treated with the same professionalism and courtesy as any other client.

Work to develop a thick skin. It is often not apparent to others the amount of preparation, or expense in materials, that has gone into a project. Gently educate others, where appropriate, without taking personal offense.

### **Issue: Misunderstandings and expectations**

**Community:** Ask each time. An agreement in present does not mean the artist will always fill the same role or expectation at each event or in every instance. An understanding should be

made clear whether the artist is declining or accepting for one instance - or if the commitment extends to future instances or services.

Give every interested individual an opportunity for service. Don't always ask the same people to do the same things.

**Artists:** Artists should be clear in declining or accepting an opportunity or request. Clarify if a commitment is for one time only or if it applies to future events or services, as well.

Refrain from taking offense if others are asked to do something you have traditionally done in your community - singing, arranging flowers, writing - even if they are not as skilled. Everyone needs to stretch, develop and be acknowledged. Let it, rather, be a challenge to get out of a personal rut and grow in a new direction of your own.

**Issue: The arts have the power and potential to soothe, excite, entertain, uplift, heal, educate, transform, startle and more. They also have a shadow side that can be prostituted for greed, power, fame, etc.**

**Community:** Encourage an open attitude towards the arts and new experiences. Invite and foster artists from varied cultural backgrounds, practicing various art forms. If you are experiencing something new which you don't care for, or don't understand, try paying more attention to the message than the presentation, delivery or specific art form.

**Artists:** Carefully consider your audience. Not every work is suitable for every audience or every environment.

Make it a personal goal to grow into detachment. Accept that not everyone will appreciate all of your work; nevertheless, it is almost always possible to find common ground if you approach them from your most imaginative self rather than ego.

**Issue: The creative impulse is a spiritual quality which transcends individual ability.**

**Community:** Creativity is indeed our spiritual birthright. It can be brought to bear in any discipline from writing fiction to engineering, from mathematics to painting - and exercised with greater and lesser skill.

There are people in our communities practicing the arts on every level from student to professional to amateur. We are often good at making opportunities and encouraging the

young, but we can create opportunities everywhere for every age, to provide new experiences and create outlets for expression of the human creative impulse.

We can also be more aware, however, that there are artists who have spent much of their lives and years of study mastering an artistic discipline(s). These individuals of accomplishment, whether professional or amateur, deserve our true respect. The artist's way is not always an easy one in the world - regardless of how free, fun, or effortless it may appear to the observer.

**Artist:**

There are such disparate levels of understanding about the potential and purposes of the arts. This is often where conflict arises. Seek those of common understanding with which to network. Online communities can be helpful. But always be careful that personal disappointments, conflicts or complaints don't become sources of public conflict or gossip.

Consider mentoring or inviting others in your community into experiences of the arts which elevate understanding and provide outlets for creativity. Sometimes puzzling or irritating behavior may be caused by envy – “you look like you are having so much fun,” or “I used to sing (paint, dance, etc.) when I was young, but I quit because...”

**Issue: Intellectual property rights, copyright, waivers and other legal and professional considerations.**

**Community:** Often well meaning individuals use, publicize, circulate, distribute and appropriate music, photos, video, etc. to which they have no rights and for which they have no releases. Together the community should help avoid such misuse and establish responsible “best practices” which seek permission, and give credit or remuneration where it is due.

**Artist:** In one sense it is a compliment that your work is admired even when misappropriated or copied without permission; on the other hand it is also an opportunity for tactful education of others regarding intellectual property rights.

**Issue: Trust can be an issue even in the Baha'i community. Artists are sometimes viewed as eccentric, prima donnas, perfectionists, troublemakers and loose cannons. Communities can have reputations as stiff, unadventurous, too conservative, traditionalists, or stuck in power plays.**

**Community:** Cultivating a spirit of openness and adventure, losing fear, learning to enjoy surprise and losing preconceived notions to make room for interpretation are essential to eliminating prejudice in our lives. Our artists should be cherished for excelling in these attributes.

**Artist:** The spiritual preparation of prayer and detachment is essential in dealing with the widely varied cultural backgrounds, education, understanding and aesthetic sensibilities in any given community. The artist must recognize and acknowledge these differences, seek an appropriate balance of respect and challenge, and strive to keep ego at bay.

**Issue: Artists need to learn to speak about their work on many levels**

**Community:** Even if you don't get it or it is not to your taste, you can be respectful of the time, effort, and training necessary to produce the visual work, music, dance, etc.

**Artist:** Don't expect everyone to appreciate or understand your work. Use questions as teaching opportunities. Answer in laymen's terms when speaking with people who are unfamiliar with your medium. Consider written artist's statements when appropriate.

**Issue: Preventing difficulties in communication between artists and communities**

**Qualities for communities to focus on:** Gratitude, openness, detachment, courtesy, professionalism and encouragement.

**Qualities for artists to focus on:** Humility, detachment, generosity of spirit, commitment, professionalism, courage, organization and follow through.

**Resources for all:**

Letter from the Universal House of Justice, July 2, 1996, Guidance Regarding Criticism.

Sample contracts for visual artists: <http://www.vsarts.org/x647.xml>

Sample artist contracts and use agreements:

<http://contracts.onecle.com/artistdirect/rca.collab.1996.11.15.shtml>