

# SUSTAINABILITY AND A CULTURE OF CHANGE

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based on statements of the Bahá'í International Community  
*illustrated with paintings by Mark Tobey (1890-1976)*

# Sustainability is a dynamic concept

- Not a goal to be reached but a balance to be maintained in space and in time
- Involving complex interactions in the whole system that maintains life on Earth (the environmental component)
- Including the human system (the social and economic components)
- That must respect planetary limits

# To achieve sustainability, we must:

- redefine our goal and purpose
- understand the evolutionary processes pushing globalization, including population growth and scientific and technological development
- identify the major driving forces behind unsustainable trends
- define and implement the responses necessary to change society and put us on a sustainable trajectory



*All men have been created to carry  
forward an ever-advancing civilization*

Bahá'u'lláh

# Haste would only make waste

- The political world...cannot instantaneously evolve from defectiveness to rightness and perfection
- qualified individuals must strive using all means conducive to progress for the development of the government and the people
- the pure intentions and justice of the ruler, the wisdom, skill and statecraft of the governing authorities, and the determined efforts of the people will combine in the advancement, reform and prosperity of government and people alike

'Abdu'l-Bahá





# UNSUSTAINABILITY

climate change

environmental  
degradation

crippling extremes of  
wealth and poverty



(Mark Tobey, *Traffic*, 1959)

# Transformation

- The transformation from a culture of unfettered consumerism to a culture of sustainability has gained momentum
- The transformation will require an earnest examination of our understanding of human nature and of the cultural frameworks driving institutions of government, business, education, and media around the world
- Questions of what is natural and just will need to be critically re-examined
- Issues need to be considered in the broader context of an ailing social order—one characterized by competition, violence, conflict and insecurity



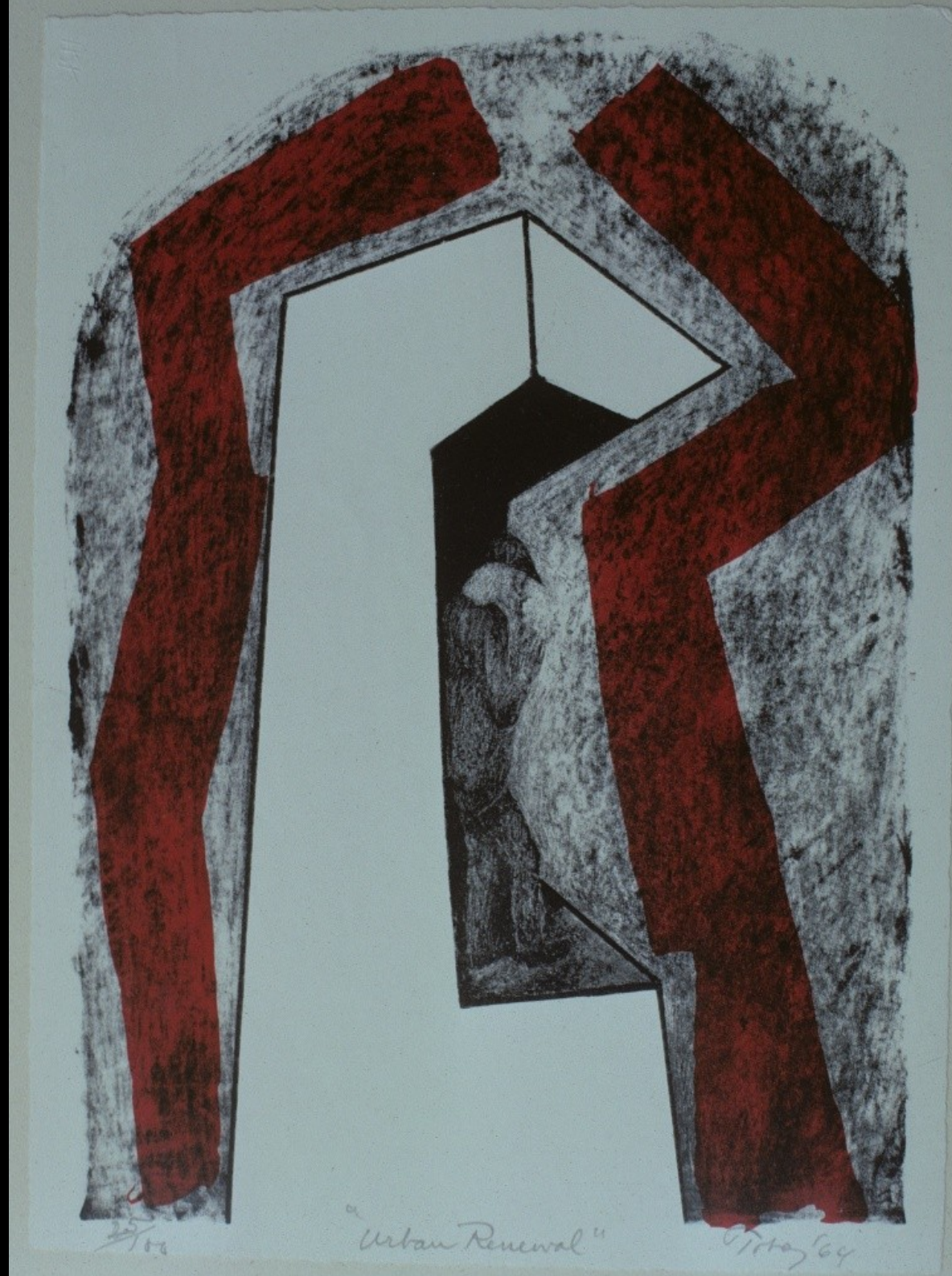
**We need public dialogue**

**among rural and urban  
dwellers;**

**among the materially poor  
and the affluent;**

**among men, women and  
young persons alike**

**on the ethical foundations  
of the necessary systemic  
change**



(Mark Tobey, *Urban Renewal*, 1964)



# A sustainable social order

- An ethic of reciprocity and balance at all levels of human organization
- Justice embodied in the recognition that the interests of the individual and of the wider community are inextricably linked
- The pursuit of justice with unity in diversity provides a guide for collective deliberation and decision-making
- A means by which unified thought and action can be achieved

# An organic change in the structure of human society reflecting

the interdependence of the entire social body  
interconnectedness with the natural world that sustains it

(Mark Tobey, *Lovers of Light*, 1960)



# Among these changes

- the consciousness of world citizenship
- the eventual federation of all nations through an integrated system of governance with capacity for global decision-making
- the establishment of structures which recognize humanity's common ownership of the earth's resources
- the establishment of full equality between men and women
- the elimination of all forms of prejudice
- the establishment of a universal currency and other integrating mechanisms that promote global economic justice
- the adoption of an international auxiliary language to facilitate mutual understanding
- the redirection of massive military expenditures towards constructive social ends



# Change from the bottom up

- progress in the development field depends on and is driven by the grass roots of society rather than from an imposition of externally developed plans and programmes
- increase local communities' and individuals' awareness of the needs and possibilities and of their capacity to respond
- different communities will likely devise different approaches and solutions in response to similar needs
- each community should determine its goals and priorities in keeping with its capacity and resources
- encourage innovation and a variety of approaches to the environment appropriate to the rhythm of life in the community

The movement to redefine cultural norms  
in light of the exigencies of justice and sustainability  
is well underway

(Mark Tobey, *The New Day*, 1945)



# Redefining cultural norms

- leading cultural institutions, including governments, education and media, as well as businesses, religious organizations and civil society are bringing the values of sustainability to the forefront of public consciousness
- Broader visions of human purpose and prosperity are moving from the periphery to the center of public discourse



# Pathway to sustainability

- The pathway to sustainability will be one of empowerment, collaboration and continual processes of questioning, learning and action in all regions of the world
- It will be shaped by the experiences of women, men, children, the rich, the poor, the governors and the governed as each one is enabled to play their rightful role in the construction of a new society

The transition is part of a global enterprise which enables all individuals to fulfill their dual purpose:

to develop their inherent potentialities

and

to contribute to the betterment of the wider community



(Mark Tobey, *Head of Boy*, 1955)

# Transition

- not just creating opportunities for those living in poverty to meet their basic needs
- each individual has a contribution to make to the construction of a more just and peaceful social order
- each must be permitted to play his or her rightful role as productive member of society



# Sustainable economy

A sustainable economy should provide for the material, social and spiritual needs of humanity across generations and enable all peoples to contribute to the ongoing advancement of society



Cultural transformation  
involves deliberate changes  
in individual choices  
and  
in institutional structures  
and norms

(Mark Tobey, *Aerial Centers*, 1967)

# Bahá'í community

- systematic transformation among individuals and communities around the world—to inspire and build the capacity for service
- a dynamic of learning—characterized by action, reflection, and consultation
- neighborhood-level processes that seek to empower individuals of all ages to recognize and develop their spiritual capacities and to channel their collective energies towards the betterment of their communities
- children's classes that focus on laying the foundations of a noble and upright character
- a learning environment for junior youth which helps them to form their moral identity at this critical time in their life and to develop skills which empower them to channel their constructive and creative energies toward the betterment of their communities
- small groups of participatory learning around core concepts and themes which encourage individuals to become agents of change in their communities within a dynamic of learning and an orientation towards service



# Service

- individuals engage in a series of acts of service, the practice of which creates capacity to meet the exigencies of dynamic, developing communities
- enhancement of such capacity is viewed in terms of “walking a path of service”
- individuals are assisted first in accomplishing relatively simple tasks and then in performing more complex and demanding acts of service

# Building capacity for change

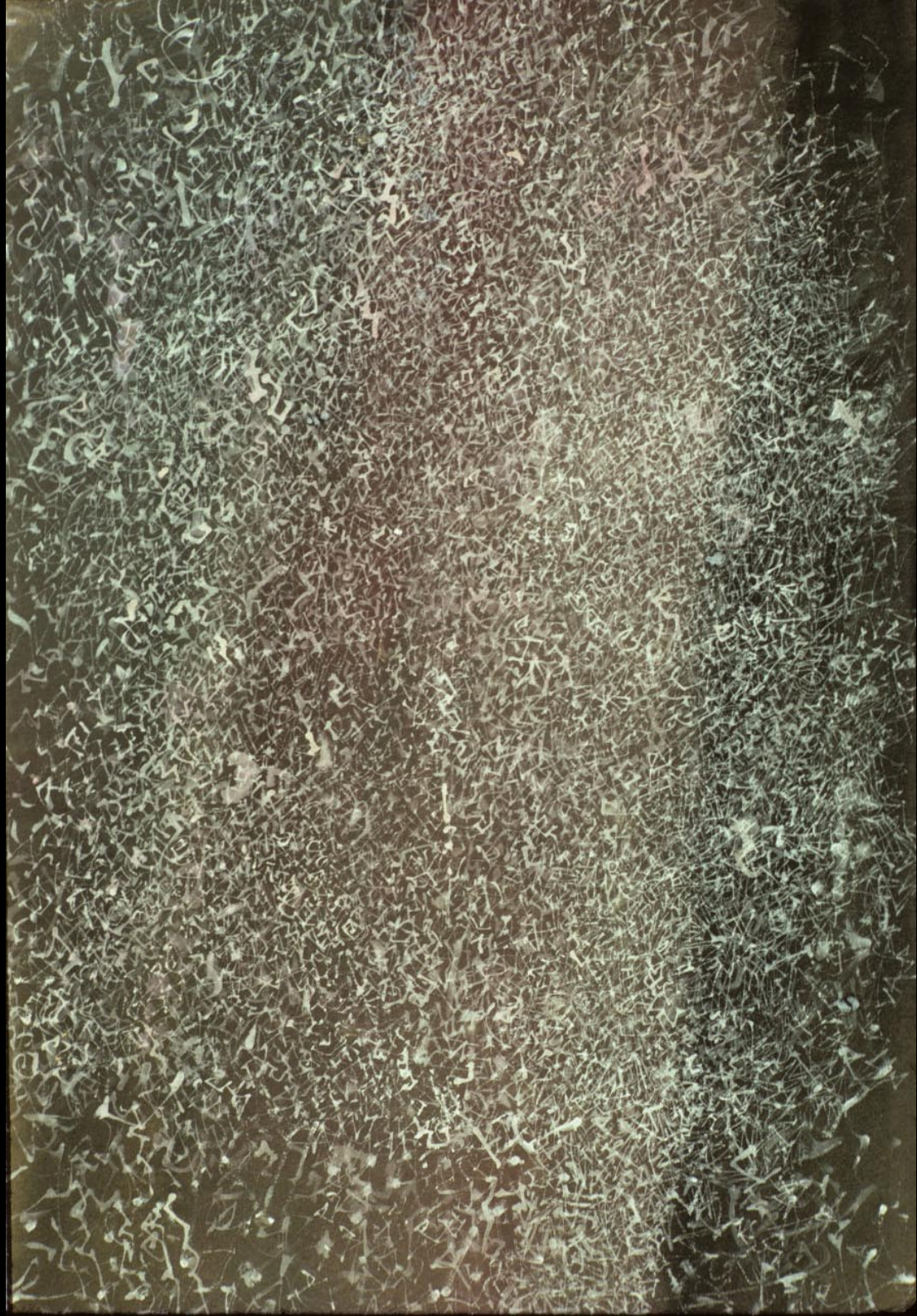
The cultural shifts taking place are evident in

- the greater capacity to carry out collective action
- to see oneself as an agent of change in the community
- as a humble learner
- as an active participant in the generation, diffusion and application of knowledge

The continuous cycle of learning through action, reflection and consultation has raised awareness of the needs and resources across communities as well as strengthened the mechanisms for collective action and deliberation.

As the sweeping tides of consumerism, unfettered consumption, extreme poverty and marginalization recede, they will reveal the human capacities for justice, reciprocity and happiness.

(Mark Tobey, *Meditative Series No.VIII*, 1954)





# Welcome to a culture of change

(Mark Tobey, untitled, 1967)

