

STORIES FROM THE LIFE OF ‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ, PART I

Excerpts from the book *Vignettes from the Life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá*
collected and edited by Annamarie Honnold (1982), with footnotes omitted.

The complete book with its sources can be found at https://bahai-library.com/honnold_vignettes_life_abdul-baha

Chapter I: His Pure Heart

#1 Abdu’l-Bahá had this to say of selfishness: ‘Self-love is a strange trait and the means of the destruction of many important souls in the world. If man be imbued with all good qualities but be selfish, all the other virtues will fade or pass away and eventually he will grow worse.’

Ch 1: Selflessness, #5

#2 The first person singular seldom crept into the Master’s speech. He once told a group of New York friends that in the future the words ‘I’ and ‘Me’ and ‘Mine’ would be regarded as profane.

Lua Getsinger reported that one day she and Georgie Ralston were driving with the Master. He closed His eyes and apparently fell asleep. Lua and Georgie talked on, probably about their own concerns, for suddenly the Master’s eyes sprang open and He laughed. ‘I, me, my, mine: words of the Devil!’ He said.

Ch 1: Selflessness, #6

#3 In 1914 *The Christian Commonwealth* carried words of praise for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá: “It is wonderful to see the venerable figure of the revered Bahá’í leader passing through the narrow streets of this ancient town [‘Akká], where he lived for forty years as a political prisoner, and to note the deep respect with which he is saluted by the Turkish officials and the officers of the garrison from the Governor downward, who visit him constantly and listen with the deepest attention to his words.

“The Master” does not teach in Syria as he did in the West, (Bahá’u’lláh had promised the Turkish Government that the Bahá’ís would not teach the people of Palestine. The Master respected that promise. They taught only by example.) but he goes about doing good, and Mohammedans and Christians alike share his

benefactions. From sunrise often till midnight he works, in spite of broken health, never sparing himself if there is a wrong to be righted or a suffering to be relieved. To Christians who regard ‘Abdu’l-Bahá with impartial and sympathetic eyes, this wonderful selfless life cannot fail to recall that life whose tragic termination on Calvary the whole Christian world recalls . . .”

Ch 1: Selflessness, #7

#4 During ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s last days in America, the Bahá’ís were eager to show their love and gratitude by contributions of money, but these He refused. ‘I am pleased with your services,’ He told them, ‘and I am grateful for all you have done for Me. . . . Now you have brought presents for the members of My family. They are acceptable, but the best of all presents is the love of God which remains preserved in the treasures of hearts.

‘Material presents remain for a time but this lasts forever. These presents require chests and shelves for safe keeping while this is preserved in the repositories of the minds and hearts and remains eternal and immortal forever in the divine worlds. I shall, therefore, convey to them your love which is the most precious of all gifts. No one uses diamond rings in our home and no one wants rubies. That house is free from all these things. I, however, accept your presents but I leave them in your safe keeping with the request that you will kindly sell them and send the proceeds to the funds for the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár.’

Ch 1: Selflessness, #14

#5 A friend had sent some fur so that the Master could have a good warm coat; He had it cut up and made into twenty caps for the elderly men of the town.

Ch 1: Selflessness, #15

The Master's humility was shown in many ways. He desired no name or title except that of 'Abdu'l-Bahá—the Servant of God. He forbade pilgrims to fall at His feet. In the early days in 'Akká, He cooked for His fellow prisoners, and later, when entertaining visitors at His table, He sometimes served His guests Himself, 'a practice he recommended to other hosts.'

Ch 1: Humility, #17

#6 'Abdu'l-Bahá laid the cornerstone of the House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois, on 1 May 1912. A temporary tent covered a spot of prairie overlooking Lake Michigan. People from different nationalities were on hand to ceremoniously turn over a bit of soil. An ordinary spade was used, but when the Master's turn came He was handed a golden trowel. He handed it back and used instead the same spade as the others. He then laid the cornerstone.

Ch 1: Humility, #21

#7 Mary Lucas, a pilgrim to 'Akká in 1905, found that the Master usually ate but one simple meal a day. In eight days He was present at most meals, often coming just to add joy to the occasion, though He was not hungry. If He knew of someone who had had no meal during a day, the family supper was gladly packed up and sent to the needy.

Ch 1: Simplicity, #30

#8 'Abdu'l-Bahá's family was taught to dress in such a way that they would be 'an example to the rich and an encouragement to the poor'. Available money was stretched to cover far more than the Master's family needs. One of His daughters wore no bridal gown when she married—a clean dress sufficed. The Master was queried why He had not provided bridal clothes. With candour He replied simply, 'My daughter is warmly clad and has all that she needs for her comfort. The poor have not. What my daughter does not need I will give to the poor. . . .'

Ch 1: Simplicity, #35

#9 'Abdu'l-Bahá had such an easy way of leading into a meaningful conversation. He would begin 'with some simple reference to a natural thing, the weather, food, a stone, tree, water, the prison, a garden or a bird, our coming, or some little act of service, and this base would be woven into a parable and teaching of wisdom and simplicity, showing the oneness of all Spiritual Truth, and adapting it always to the life, both of the individual and of mankind.

All of His words are directed toward helping men to live. Unless questions of metaphysics, dogmas and doctrines be introduced, He seldom mentions them. He speaks easily, clearly, in brief phrases, each of which is a gem.'

Ch 1: Simplicity, #37

#10 There was a man in Haifa who disliked 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Whenever he saw the Master, he crossed the street to avoid Him. Finally, one day he approached 'Abdu'l-Bahá and said, 'So You are called the Servant of God.' 'Yes,' said 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'that is My name.'

'Well,' said the man proudly, 'I am Moses.'

'Very well, Moses,' said 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 'meet Me at this corner at seven o'clock in the morning tomorrow and we will go and serve the people like the great Moses did.'

The man agreed and when they met the next morning, 'Abdu'l-Bahá took him on His routine of serving the unfortunates, helping the poor and needy, consulting with people and giving counsel. At six o'clock that evening when they returned to the spot where they had started, he was extremely weary.

'Remember, Moses,' said 'Abdu'l-Bahá before they parted, 'I'll meet you here tomorrow morning at seven o'clock.'

Again they met the following morning and again 'Abdu'l-Bahá took the man through his regular work. Returning at six o'clock that evening the man was very tired. Sternly, 'Abdu'l-Bahá told him, 'Remember, Moses, tomorrow morning I'll meet you here.'

They met the third morning and again 'Abdu'l-Bahá took him through His regular work day. When they returned that evening, the man was exhausted. As they parted, the man said, "Abdu'l-Bahá, tomorrow morning I will no longer be Moses."

Ch 1: Patience, #45

Chapter II: His Kindly Heart

#11 Speaking to a group of friends at a meeting in Chicago in 1912, He said: 'Be in perfect unity. Never become angry with one another. Let your eyes be directed toward the kingdom of truth and not toward the world of creation. Love the creatures for the sake of God and not for themselves. You will never become angry or impatient if you love them for the sake of God. Humanity is not perfect. . . There are imperfections in every human being and you will always become unhappy if you look toward the people themselves. But if you look toward God you will love them and be kind to them, for the world of God is the world of perfection and complete mercy. Therefore do not look at the shortcomings of anybody; see with the sight of forgiveness.

Ch 2: Forgiveness, #17

#12 After Bahá'u'lláh's confinement in the Most Great Prison in 'Akká had ended, but while He was yet residing in the town, an Egyptian merchant, 'Abdu'l-Karím, afire with God's latest message, desired to visit Him. He wrote for permission to go on pilgrimage. He must have been greatly surprised when the reply arrived: he might go on pilgrimage but only after all his debts were paid.

He had been in business for many years. His caravans crossed the desert with precious cargo. He had quite naturally been interested in expanding his business, but now his consuming interest was to 'owe no man anything'. It followed that when he received a payment, instead of investing it for further gain, he paid off a debt. This continued for five years, until at last he was debt-free.

His business shrank. No longer did 'love of wealth' consume him. When all his debts

were paid, he had only enough to keep his family going in his absence and to pay for deck passage on a ship bound for Haifa.

Formerly, he would have travelled first-class. Now he had neither bed nor warm stateroom. Never mind! He was going to see Bahá'u'lláh. As he crossed the gangplank, his shawl slipped into the water. The night would be chilly, but his heart was glad and he felt 'alive with prayer'.

Bahá'u'lláh informed His family that He was expecting an honoured guest. A carriage was sent to Haifa to pick up the merchant, but the attendant received no description of this very special guest. As the passengers disembarked, he watched them very carefully—surely he would recognize someone so distinguished—but the passengers appeared quite ordinary and in due time he returned to 'Akká with word that Bahá'u'lláh's visitor had not arrived.

The merchant had expected to be met. He had no money left to hire a carriage. Bitterly disappointed, he seated himself on a bench, feeling forlorn and destitute.

Bahá'u'lláh knew that His distinguished guest had arrived, even though he had not been recognized. This time He sent 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who, in the twilight, recognized 'the disappointed figure huddled upon the bench.' Quickly the Master introduced Himself and explained what had happened. Then He asked the traveller if he would like to go to 'Akká that very night or if he would prefer to wait until morning. The merchant had already spent hours in prayer in preparation for his meeting with Bahá'u'lláh, but now he found that bitterness had seeped into his heart—he had felt so forgotten and alone upon his arrival in Haifa. He had even begun to wonder about the very station of Bahá'u'lláh. For what had he given up his fortune? He was in spiritual torment. However, in the presence of this welcome and gentle Man, doubts and suspicions ebbed out of his soul; yet he felt the need of hours of prayer to feel spiritually ready to meet God's Emissary.

As the story is told, Abbás Effendi knew instinctively that His new friend would not wish to seek a hotel at His expense, so finding that he preferred to wait until morning for the journey to ‘Akká, ‘he unbuttoned the long cloak that enveloped him, seated himself beside the pilgrim, and wrapped both in its ample folds. So they passed the night praying together, lost in that ecstasy of prayer that brings realization.’

The next morning they proceeded towards the prison-city of ‘Akká. At long last the Egyptian appeared before Bahá’u’lláh with a glad heart, purified through five years of testing.

Ch 2: Gentleness, #32

#13 In ‘Akká the Master’s room often contained not even a bed as He was continually giving His own to those more needy than He. Wrapped in a blanket, He would lie on the floor or even on the roof of His home. It was not possible to buy a bed in the town of ‘Akká; a bed ordered from Haifa took at least thirty-six hours to arrive. Inevitably, when the Master went on His morning round of visitations and found a feverish individual tossing on bare ground, He sent him His bed. Only after His own situation was inadvertently discovered did He receive another bed, thanks to some kind friend.

Ch 2: Sympathy and Understanding, #35

Chapter III: His Radiant Heart

#14 Prison walls themselves did not obscure the happiness in the heart of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. In prison He could write, ‘Grieve not because of my imprisonment and calamity; for this prison is my beautiful garden, my mansioned paradise and my throne of dominion among mankind. My calamity in my prison is a crown to me in which I glory among the righteous.’

At another time He wrote, ‘Anybody can be happy in the state of comfort, ease, health, success, pleasure and joy; but if one will be happy and contented in the time of trouble, hardship and prevailing disease, it is the proof of nobility.’

It is a beautiful thing to realize that life’s experiences did not sour or embitter the Master’s outlook.

Tuberculosis at the age of seven, poverty, exile, separation from Bahá’u’lláh, imprisonment, the death of His sons— He endured all these, and more, and remained optimistic and cheerful towards life. He walked nobly in adversity.

Ch 3: #51

#15 O Lord! Graciously assist me and Thy sincere servants in our servitude to Thine exalted Threshold, strengthen us in our supplication to Thy divine holiness, and enable us to be lowly and submissive before the door of Thy oneness. Make firm my steps in Thy path, O my Lord, and illumine my heart with the effulgent rays shed from the heaven of Thy mysteries. Refresh my spirit with the stirring breeze that wafteth from the paradise of Thy pardon and forgiveness, and gladden my soul through the reviving breath diffused from the meadows of Thy holiness. Brighten my face above the horizon of Thy unity, and grant that I may be reckoned as one of Thy sincere servants and numbered with Thy bondsmen who stand firm and steadfast.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Your personal prayers

Reflection on the Text

Discussion:

- Which of these qualities of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá are easy to emulate?
- Which ones are hard?
- Please tell a favorite story about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá not shared in this program.