

STORIES FROM THE LIFE OF ‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ, PART 2

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 Only the Master, knowing the station bestowed upon Him by Bahá’u’lláh, could say, as He did: “. . . look at Me, follow Me, be as I am; take no thought for yourselves or your lives, whether ye eat or whether ye sleep, whether ye are comfortable, whether ye are well or ill, whether ye are with friends or foes, whether ye receive praise or blame; for all of these things ye must care not at all. Look at Me and be as I am; ye must die to yourselves and to the world, so shall ye be born again and enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Behold a candle how it gives its light. It weeps its life away drop by drop in order to give forth its flame of light.”

Ch1, #9

#2 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was not afraid of silence; indeed, He knew its virtue. Howard Colby Ives has recalled: “To the questioner He responded first with silence—an outward silence. His encouragement always was that the other should speak and He listen. There was never that eager tenseness, that restlessness so often met showing most plainly that the listener has the pat answer ready the moment he should have a chance to utter it.” And Ives recounts a charming story about another Unitarian minister who was interviewing ‘Abdu’l-Bahá for an article on the Bahá’í Faith. His questions were long. The Master listened “with unwearied attention,” replying mostly in monosyllables, but relaxed and interested. A great “understanding love” flowed from Him to the minister. Ives grew impatient, but not the Master; His guest must be heard fully. When at last His questioner paused, after a brief silence ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke to him with wisdom and love, calling him “my dear son.” Within five minutes the minister “had become humble, for the moment, at least, a disciple at His feet. . . .

Then ‘Abdu’l-Bahá rose . . . lovingly embraced the doctor and led him towards the door. At the threshold He paused. His eyes had lighted upon a large bunch of American Beauty roses . . . He laughed aloud . . . stooped, gathered the whole bunch in His arms . . . and placed them all in the arms of His visitor. Never shall I forget that round, bespectacled, grey head above that immense bunch of lovely flowers. So surprised, so radiant, so humble, so transformed.”

Ch 1, #11

#3 Whenever possible ‘Abdu’l-Bahá attempted to avoid unnecessary fanfare. Once, wealthy visitors from the West planned an elaborate pre-meal, hand-washing scene for Him—it included a page boy, a clean bowl with ‘crystal water’ and even a scented towel! When the Master saw the group walking across the lawn, He knew their purpose. He hurried to a small water-trough, washed as usual and then wiped His hands on the cloth of the gardener. Radiantly, He then turned to meet His guests. The preparations meant for Him He used for them.

Ch 1. #20

#4 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá inspired the creation of a Local Spiritual Assembly in New York City. Loulie Mathews, one of those present when the friends met to form their first local institution, recalled that they had very little idea of how to proceed. Anxious to impress each other they first sat stiffly along the wall. No, a circle would be better—so they moved. Suddenly the doorbell rang. Grace Krug returned with a cablegram—from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá! It stated simply: “Read Matthew, Chapter 19, Verse 30.” They needed a Bible. Finally both Bible and page were found. The message read, “But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first.” “Presto, we became as humble as mice—

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afraid lest that last place should be ours! 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave us a wonderful lesson that evening! If we went away without too much knowledge of how to form an Assembly, we learned a lesson in how to become Bahá'ís. Bathed in the aura of humility the Assembly came into being."

Ch. 1, #22

#5 Howard Ives wrote, "In all of my many opportunities of meeting, of listening to and talking with 'Abdu'l-Bahá I was impressed, and constantly more deeply impressed, with His method of teaching souls. . . . He never argued, of course. Nor did He press a point. He left one free. There was never an assumption of authority, rather He was ever the personification of humility. He taught 'as if offering a gift to a king.' He never told me what I should do, beyond suggesting that what I was doing was right. Nor did He ever tell me what I should believe. He made Truth and Love so beautiful and royal that the heart perforce did reverence. He showed me by His voice, manner, bearing, smile, how I should be, knowing that out of the pure soil of being the good fruit of deeds and words would surely spring."

Ch. 1, #25

#6 Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl was an outstanding Bahá'í scholar. Early in this century the Master sent him to the United States of America both to teach and to help the believers to deepen. "After his return, he and a number of American pilgrims were seated in the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 'Akká. The pilgrims began to praise Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl for the help he had given them, saying that he had taught many souls, defended the Cause most ably against its adversaries, and had helped to build a strong and dedicated Bahá'í community in America. As they continued to pour lavish praise upon him, Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl became increasingly depressed and dejected, until he burst into tears and wept loudly. The believers were surprised and could not understand this, even thinking that they had not praised him enough!

"Then 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained that by praising him they had bitterly hurt him, for he considered himself as utter nothingness in the Cause and believed with absolute sincerity that he was not worthy of any mention or praise."

Ch. 1, #26

#7 The Master considered cleanliness of vital importance. He was indeed 'the essence of cleanliness' even as Bahá'u'lláh had taught His followers. Florence Khánúm bore witness to this, for she found Him "dazzlingly, spotlessly . . . shining, from snowy turban-cloth, to white, snowy hair falling upon His shoulders, to white snowy beard and long snowy garment . . . Although it was high noon, in summer . . . His attire was crisp and fresh-looking, as though He had not been visiting the sick, and in prison, and toiling for mankind since early morning. Often a deliciously fresh rose was tucked in His belt."

Ch. 1, #38

#8 Not only His person but also his immediate surroundings Not only His person but also His immediate surroundings needed to be spotless. Once when He had guests—whom He would always honour—He asked that the chimney of a lamp be replaced as it was not sufficiently polished.

Ch. 1, #39

Chapter II: His Kindly Heart

#9 Kindness lies at the heart of loving discipline. 'Abdu'l-Bahá dearly loved His little grandson, Shoghi, but he needed to learn to be on time. This he learned very early in his life "after receiving one good chastisement from no other hand than that of his grandfather!" He then became the first to get up for the family prayers and breakfast.

Ch. 2, Discipline, #9

#10 'Abdu'l-Bahá was born on the same night that the Báb declared His Mission in Shíráz on 22 May 1844, so on that day in 1906 it

was about the Báb, His work and message, that He spoke. For the occasion over two hundred guests were to dine at the Master's table. Since dawn He had been busy helping with the work involved, Himself kneading dough to be put in the ovens, "in gay spirits, inspiring, uplifting, cheering all His helpers". Later He 'assisted in passing the platters . . . the rice . . . the lamb . . . the fruits of the region (of such large size, such colour, and such fragrance as only the sunshine of the East produces and paints). Moving among His two hundred guests, He spoke to them as He served them, such Divine words of love and spiritual import . . . 'If one of you has been wounded in heart by the words or deeds of another, during the past year, forgive him now; that in purity of heart and loving pardon, you may feast in happiness, and arise, renewed in spirit.'"

Ch. 2, Forgiveness, #14

#11 In 1911 the Master spent a few quiet days in the French Alps, presumably to rest, before continuing to London. Here took place a remarkable encounter which illustrates the universality of His love, even towards those whose hearts ran hostile to Him and to His Father's Cause. Juliet Thompson tells us the following about this occasion which she herself witnessed: "Monstrously sinned against, too great was He to claim the right to forgive. In His almost offhand brushing aside of a cruelty, in the ineffable sweetness with which He ignored it, it was as though He said: Forgiveness belongs only to God.

"An example of this was His memorable meeting with the royal prince, Zillah Sultán, brother of the Sháh of Persia, Muhammad 'Alí Sháh. Not alone 'Abdu'l-Bahá, but a great number of His followers, band after band of Bahá'í martyrs, had suffered worse than death at the hands of these two princes. When the downfall of the Sháh, with that of the Sultán of Turkey, set 'Abdu'l-Bahá at liberty, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, beginning His journey through Europe, went first to Thonon-les-Bains, on the Lake of Geneva. The exiled Sháh was then

somewhere in Europe; Zillah Sultán, also in exile with his two sons, had fled to Geneva. Thus 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the exonerated and free, and Zillah Sultán, the fugitive, were almost within a stone's throw of each other.

#12 "In the suite of 'Abdu'l-Bahá was a distinguished European who had visited Persia and there met Zillah Sultán. One day when the European was standing on the balustraded terrace of the hotel in Thonon and 'Abdu'l-Bahá was pacing to and fro at a little distance, Zillah Sultán approached the terrace. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was wearing, as always, the turban, the long white belted robe and long 'abá of Persia. His hair, according to the ancient custom of the Persian nobility, flowed to His shoulders. Zillah Sultán, after greeting the European, immediately asked:

'Who is that Persian nobleman?'

'Abdu'l-Bahá.'

'Take me to Him.'

"In describing the scene later, the European said: 'If you could have heard the wretch mumbling his miserable excuses!' But 'Abdu'l-Bahá took the prince in His arms. 'All that is of the past,' He answered. 'Never think of it again. Send your two sons to see me. I want to meet your sons.'

#13 "They came, one at a time. Each spent a day with the Master. The first, though an immature boy, nevertheless showed Him great deference. The second, older and more sensitive, left the room of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, where he had been received alone, weeping uncontrollably. 'If only I could be born again,' he said, 'into any other family than mine.'

"For not only had many Bahá'ís been martyred during his uncle's reign (upwards of a hundred by his father's instigation), and the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá threatened again and again, but his grandfather, Násiri'd-Dín Sháh, had ordered the execution of the Báb, as well as the torture and death of thousands of Bábís.

The young prince was 'born again'—a Bahá'í."

Ch. 2, Forgiveness, #16

#14 Till the very last day of His earthly life ‘Abdu’l-Bahá continued to shower that same love upon high and low alike, to extend that same assistance to the poor and the down-trodden, and to carry out those same duties in the service of His Father’s Faith, as had been His wont from the days of His boyhood. On the Friday before His passing, despite great fatigue, He attended the noonday prayer at the mosque, and distributed afterwards alms, as was His custom, among the poor; dictated some Tablets—the last ones He revealed—blessed the marriage of a trusted servant, which He had insisted should take place that day; attended the usual meeting of the friends in His home; felt feverish the next day, and being unable to leave the house on the following Sunday, sent all the believers to the Tomb of the Báb to attend a feast which a Parsí pilgrim was offering on the occasion of the anniversary of the Declaration of the Covenant; received with His unfailing courtesy and kindness that same afternoon, and despite growing weariness, the Muftí of Haifa, the Mayor and the Head of the Police; and inquired that night—the last of His life—before He retired after the health of every member of His household, of the pilgrims and of the friends in Haifa.

#15 At 1:15 a.m. He arose, and, walking to a table in His room, drank some water, and returned to bed. Later on, He asked one of His two daughters who had remained awake to care for Him, to lift up the net curtains, complaining that He had difficulty in breathing. Some rose-water was brought to Him, of which He drank, after which He again lay down, and when offered food, distinctly remarked: “You wish Me to take some food, and I am going?” A minute later His spirit had winged its flight to its eternal abode, to be gathered, at long last, to the glory of His beloved Father, and taste the joy of everlasting reunion with Him.

—from *God Passes By*

#16 O Thou kind Lord! We are servants of Thy threshold, taking shelter at Thy holy Door. We seek no refuge save only this strong pillar, turn nowhere for a haven but unto Thy safekeeping. Protect us, bless us, support us, make us such that we shall love but Thy good pleasure, utter only Thy praise, follow only the pathway of truth, that we may become rich enough to dispense with all save Thee, and receive our gifts from the sea of Thy beneficence, that we may ever strive to exalt Thy Cause and to spread Thy sweet savors far and wide, that we may become oblivious of self and occupied only with Thee, and disown all else and be caught up in Thee.

O Thou Provider, O Thou Forgiver! Grant us Thy grace and loving-kindness, Thy gifts and Thy bestowals, and sustain us, that we may attain our goal. Thou art the Powerful, the Able, the Knower, the Seer; and verily Thou art the Generous, and verily Thou art the All-Merciful, and verily Thou art the Ever-Forgiving, He to Whom repentance is due, He Who forgiveth even the most grievous of sins.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Your personal prayers

Reflection on the Text

Discussion

1. What one new thing did you learn from the readings?
2. Describe some of the challenges to “spotless cleanliness” in early 1900s Palestine.
3. Name one practical way to emulate ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.