

STORIES FROM THE LIFE OF ‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ, PART 3

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

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

Chapter I: His Pure Heart

#1 When a reporter of the New York Globe visited ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Haifa, He gave her this message: ‘Tell my followers that they have no enemies to fear, no foes to hate. Man’s only enemy is himself.’

Ch 1, #4

#2 Two pilgrims were at the Master’s luncheon table one day in 1908. He asked them if they were glad to be in ‘Akká and if they were happy. They replied that they were very happy to be there with Him, but unhappy when they thought of their own faults. ‘Think not of yourselves,’ He said, ‘but think of the Bounty of God. This will always make you happy.’ Then with a smile He referred to an Arabic saying about the peacock, who ‘is contented because he never looks at his feet—which are very ugly—but always at his plumage which is very beautiful.’

Ch 1, #8

#3 The Master’s life was centered on God, not on Himself. To do God’s will, to be His servant, were His concerns. He disliked photographs of Himself, permitting them only to satisfy His friends. ‘But to have a picture of oneself,’ He said, ‘is to emphasise the personality, which is merely the lamp, and is quite unimportant. The light burning within the lamp has the only real significance.’

Ch 1, #10

#4 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

#5 During World War I when a blockade threatened the lives of many civilians in Haifa, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá saved them from starvation. ‘He personally organized extensive agricultural operations near Tiberias, thus securing a great supply of wheat . . .’ Food was stored in underground pits and elsewhere. This He distributed to the inhabitants, regardless of religion or nationality. The food was systematically rationed. Having started His preparations as early as 1912, He averted tragedy in the dark days of 1917 and 1918.

At war’s end the British were quick to recognize His painstaking accomplishments. He was to be knighted on 27 April 1920, at the residence of the British Governor in Haifa at a ceremony held especially for Him. British and religious dignitaries came to honour Him on this auspicious occasion. His unselfish acts had won Him the love and respect of high and low alike. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá consented to accept the knighthood—but He was not impressed with worldly honour or ceremony.

#6 Even a formality must be simplified. An elegant car was sent to bring Him to the Governor’s residence, but the chauffeur did not find the Master at His home. People scurried in every direction to find Him. Suddenly, He appeared ‘. . . alone, walking His kingly walk, with that simplicity of greatness which always enfolded Him.’ Isfandíyár, His long-time faithful servant, stood near at hand. Many were the times when he had accompanied the Master on His labours of love. Now, suddenly, with this elegant car ready to convey his Master to the Governor, he felt sad and unneeded. Intuitively, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá must have sensed this—He gave him a sign. Isfandíyár dashed off—the horse was harnessed, the carriage brought to the lower gate and the Master was driven to a side entrance of the garden of the Governor. Isfandíyár was joyous—he was needed even yet. Quietly, without pomp, ‘Abbás Effendi arrived at the right time at the right place

and did honour to those who would honour Him when He was made Sir ‘Abdu’l-Bahá ‘Abbás, K.B.E.—a title which He almost never used.

Ch. 1, Humility, #19

#7 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s humility did not stem from any weakness. Once when a child asked Him why all the rivers of the earth flow into the ocean, He said, ‘because it sets itself lower than them all and so draws them to itself.’

Ch. 1, Humility, #23

#8 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, Humility #25

#9 The Master kept little clothing—one coat at a time was ample. He ate little food. He was known to begin His day with tea, goat’s milk cheese and wheat bread. And at the evening meal a cup of milk and a piece of bread might suffice. He considered the latter a healthy meal. Had not Bahá’u’lláh, while at Sulaymáníyyih, subsisted mostly on milk? (Sometimes Bahá’u’lláh ate rice and milk cooked together.) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s sparse diet also included herbs and olives—it rarely included meat.

Ch. 1, Simplicity, #20

Chapter II: His Kindly Heart

#10 One day ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was asked how one should live. His reply was, ‘Be kind to everyone. . .

One must not belittle the thoughts of another. This kindness must reach out even to those who may suffer mental illness, as the Master so beautifully demonstrated when Mírzá Áqá Ján, who had been the amanuensis of Bahá’u’lláh, became disturbed. In spite of the troubles that this ill man caused, the Master did not want him banished to Yemen as the mayor of ‘Akká suggested. To Juliet Thompson the Master said, ‘Never let anyone speak of another unkindly in your presence. Should anyone do so, stop them. Tell them it is against the commands of Bahá’u’lláh, that He has commanded: “Love one another.” Never speak an unkind word yourself, against anyone. If you see something wrong let your silence be your only comment . . .’

Ch. 2, Kindliness

#11 A major event during the Master’s visit to America was the dedication of the land for the first Bahá’í House of Worship of the western hemisphere in Wilmette, Illinois. Mrs Nettie Tobin lived nearby in Chicago and was anxious to contribute something, despite the fact that she was not well off. The following is her account of how she solved the problem. ‘I had heard that the Master was to be at the Temple site on May first, and I thought that He should have a suitable stone to mark the location of the Temple. So I went to a building under construction near my home, and seeing a pile of stones at a wall, I asked the builder if I could get a stone. He said, “Sure, help yourself, these are rejected.” So I went home, got an old, small, baby carriage, loaded the stone into it and wheeled it home. Early the next morning, with the help of a Persian friend, I wheeled the carriage to the car line, and, against the protests of the conductor, we got the carriage onto the platform of the car. We made two changes and finally, after endless delays, we got the baby carriage to the corner of Central Street and Sheridan Road. Here, when we pushed the carriage over a broken pavement it collapsed. As we stood despairing of getting the stone to the Temple grounds in time, since the hour had passed for the service, two boys with an express wagon came along. The boys were quickly persuaded to lend their wagon for the transportation and so we finally came

to the grounds. Imagine my joy when “the stone refused by the builder” was received and used by the Master!’

Ch. 2, Kindliness, #2

#12 One day in London the hour for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s private audiences had arrived. Appointments had been made and, of necessity, an attempt was made to adhere to them rigidly. But ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was a Man who taught moderation and consideration. A woman arrived without an appointment and was told it was not possible to fit her in, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was talking with some ‘most important people’. Descending the stairway, she was greatly disappointed. Suddenly, to her astonishment, a messenger from the Master dashed down to her saying that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wished to see her. With authority His voice was heard, saying: ‘A heart has been hurt. Hasten, hasten, bring her to Me!’

Ch. 2, Sensitivity, #19

#13 When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was in London, there was a workman who had left his bag of tools in a hall. He chanced upon the smiling Master. Sadly the workman told of his predicament: ‘I don’t know much about religious things, as I have no time for anything but my work.’ Words of reassurance came in reply: ‘That is well. Very well. A day’s work done in the spirit of service is in itself an act of worship. Such work is a prayer unto God.’

Ch. 2, Encouragement, #26

#13 O Thou peerless and loving Lord! Though capacity and worthiness are lacking, and it is infinitely hard to withstand tribulations, yet worthiness and capacity are gifts vouchsafed by Thee. O Lord! Give us capacity and make us worthy, that we may evince the most great steadfastness, renounce this world and all its people, kindle the fire of Thy love, and even as candles, burn bright with a consuming flame and shed abroad our radiance.

O Lord of the Kingdom! Deliver us from this world of vain illusions, and lead us unto the realm of the infinite. Suffer us to be wholly freed from this nether life, and cause us to be blessed with the bountiful gifts of the Kingdom. Release us from

this world of nothingness that beareth the semblance of reality, and confer upon us life everlasting. Bestow on us joy and delight, and favour us with gladness and contentment. Comfort our hearts, and grant peace and tranquillity to our souls, so that upon ascending unto Thy Kingdom we may attain Thy presence and may rejoice in the realms above. Thou art the Giver, the Bestower, the Almighty!

‘Abdu’l-Bahá

Your personal prayers

Reflection on the Text

Discussion

1. What one new thing did you learn from the readings?
2. Name one practical way to emulate ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.