

Book Review

Memorials of the Faithful

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In any attempt to discuss intelligently what this profoundly important book is about I find myself drawn irresistibly to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's portraits, not so much of the 77 individuals he so deftly describes, but of the condition they may come to occupy in the world beyond. Indeed 'Abdu'l-Bahá creates what could appropriately be called a vocabulary associated with the afterlife. The following words are used frequently when 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to the passing of the 77 individuals and their condition in the next life. He uses these words in assuring us of their new condition or in offering us a description of what he hopes will be that condition:

light, splendours, grace, mercy, forgiveness' nearness, assemblage, celestial company, musk-scented, camphor, sweet scent of holiness, bestowals, gifts, rewards, mysterious, endless, placeless, waters, gardens, fair and undiscovered country, goodly home, gentle gales, food, drink of brimming cup, the place of the mystical contemplation of God, all-highest realm, highest heaven, Abhá paradise.

These words suggest that "the purified soul connects with other souls in those worlds, and the powers and joys become so intensified that we will wonder at ever having lived as separate tiny candles, alone with our flickering light, when in the worlds to come we will be ablaze as one radiant force." (1)¹ This radiant force is described by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, over and over again, in terms of light. These words are intended, as are the words of Dante and other great artistic luminaries, to illustrate and help make comprehensible to our earth-bound senses, a vision of divine order and heavenly beauty.(2)

All our instinctual human desires and fears," says Conow², "will disappear, to become one pre-phenomenal fear and desire, the awe of God and the yearning to return to Him."(3) 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes the process in terms

1. B. Hoff Conow, **The Bahá'í Teachings: A Resurgent Model of the Universe**, George Ronald, Oxford, 1990, p.142.
2. Kenneth Clark, **Civilization**, Penguin Books, NY,1969, pp.147-148.

of the mystical contemplation of God, nearness and the sweet scent of holiness. In dozens of subtle and sometimes graphic depictions of the passing of these men, for there are only three women, human salvation is partly defined as motion toward godliness, and endless progression, a heavenly, intellectual and aesthetic journey that has already had its beginning in this earthly life. Indeed this earthly life has, as its animating theme, a vision of this world as a reflection of the spiritual world. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's vision, though, is one which suggests that "a dedicated study of one reality will inevitably facilitate an understanding of the other." Hence the value in this life of the pursuit of learning in virtually any form and any subject but especially, of course, those subjects that profit humankind.

Just as this life is neither static nor fixed so in the next is change and a continual refining process also the story. We do not attain one condition of perfection but many perfections. At the point in time when we no longer can use the physical metaphor, the teaching device of the phenomenal world, we detach, or are detached, from it. 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes this point of detachment, the point of departure in vivid variation. In studying the many descriptions of this departure one gets a real sense of the afterlife as both wonderful transformation and simple continuity.

This, then, is where my own eye is drawn to in examining the several dozen picture portraits, the choreography of lives which 'Abdu'l-Bahá sets before us. But, of course, the book is much more than the simple story of human lives. The book serves a number of functions not the least of which is an informed guide on how to live. The revelation, which 'Abdu'l-Bahá was intimately associated with during Bahá'u'lláh's life, contained literally thousands of pages of guidance on this question. In *Memorials to the Faithful* this elderly Persian man who had enjoyed what the Guardian called "a mystic intercourse" with his Father, tells us how some seventy-seven people applied this guidance in day-to-day living.

'Abdu'l-Bahá observed with unobtrusive care, with warmth and tenderness, the day-to-day lives of these people. As Marzieh Gail puts it in her introduction, the Master is giving us a testament of indispensable values for the survival of our own selves and humanity itself. The question "how to live?" sounds like a deceptively easy question. But for millions on this planet that is a central, if only partially asked question. What should I do? How do I decide whether to go fishing or to read a book? The question is an easy one to ask, but the answer takes so many forms that modern man lives in some state of confusion.

The question is a particularly acute one for Bahá'ís who spend their lives trying to put into practice what often seems an impossible agenda of spiritual and moral prerequisites. For their's is a search for peace, happiness, success, closeness to God, etcetera, etcetera. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, I'm sure, was also aware

of' the difficulty. He was aware, too, that He would be the exemplar, the model, of how to 'live the life' for many generations to come. In a religion under whose spiritual umbrella billions of souls would one day be protected from the rain, the tempest of life, it would be useful for that future community to have a range of' models of how ordinary men and women, people who had no station, no special relationship as He had with the Source, with Bahá'u'lláh, put the whole thing into practice.

And so he describes the entire lives of over six-dozen People, albeit in the briefest of compass. The descriptions are succinct, deceptive quotients. I think many readers miss so much of what this book is on about by thinking, as they read, that they are reading about funny old men who lived long ago and what they are doing in the book has little to do with the modern world. The long names; the brief descriptions of people's lives give the modern reader a sense of irrelevance. I don't think I'd ever lend this book to a non-Bahá'í for their "first read." I have talked to many long serving Bahá'ís, as well, who have never even read this book. And many who have read it, don't seem to have any idea of what it is about. Just a bit of history, they say to me. They forget, if they ever knew, that there is a metaphorical nature to Bahá'í history. It is not just an inspirational account of men who lived long ago.

'Abdu'l-Bahá spends from one to several pages on each character and, in the process, He gives us the full range of human types, the range there has always been and the range there would probably always be in the rich texture of the greatest drama on earth: people in community. I shall discuss briefly some of the types in the paragraphs below and leave it to readers to get themselves 'into' this book with a sense of new eyes. For all of us must keep coming back to old books with new eyes, if the revelation in all its grandeur and mystery is to stay fresh in our hearts and minds.

Restlessness is a dominant theme for many people who 'could not stay quiet', 'had no rest', were 'amazingly energetic', were 'awakened to restless life', or were 'plagued by yearning love'. Nabíl of Qá'in was "restless, had no caution, patience or reserve."(p.51) Shah Muhammad-Amín "had no peace" because of the love that smouldered in his heart and because he "was continuously in flight."(p.46) 'Abdu'l-Bahá describes this restless personality, one of a fascinating galaxy of men He came to know.

In a community that does a lot of talking it is interesting to read about: the quiet personality. The men and women who keep mostly to themselves, are 'inclined to solitude' and keep 'silent at all times' are painted with deft brevity. You just about miss the whole point when He talks about their 'inner calm', that they are souls 'at rest', 'souls who were at rest' or who remained in 'one and the same inner state'. Who are these quiet ones who do not fill the air with the sound of their own voice and seem to have an inner calm which seems to perplex us as we go about in our garrulous state? I don't

mean to oversimplify a complex issue, but clearly quiet people, people who don't like going to meetings, indeed, virtually every conceivable human type have a place in this new community we are building. I'm not sure the term 'active members' would have any meaning in the terminology offered to us by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in this delightful, this deceptively simple, book.

There is an element of restlessness in the human psyche that will not leave us in peace and incessantly asks for more, to see and have and understand, more and more and yet more. 'Abdu'l-Bahá stresses not the unease or frustration, which so often is basically unhealthy, but the sense of urgency and eagerness in alliance with the inner life, the soul. It is a spiritual restlessness that urges us toward transcendence, toward 'that undiscovered country'. Táhirih was "restless and could not be still". There are a host of others in this book with the same quality. We meet such souls all over the Bahá'í world as we travel from place to place: always on the go, can't sit still. When you recognize them, at first, on the telephone, you often think 'not them again!' They are, like the quiet ones, part of that slowly evolving revolutionary force. It takes all kinds. For that is what people in community is about.

This boundless and surging motion within the soul is a vitality, a quicksilver life of the spirit. The impulse to express this spiritual restlessness is what 'Abdu'l-Bahá again and again draws to our attention in his writings as he lays the foundation for what he knows will one day be incarnated in a new world Order. It is also a key quality required for the enormous job that the Bahá'í community is charged with: the spiritual conquest of the planet³. The theme of restlessness and rest is also reflected in a similar contrast between: Quiet People and Talkative Ones.

There seems to be a gregarious type and a type of person who keeps to himself. Ustád Bâqir and Ustád Ahmad both kept to themselves and "away from friend and stranger alike"(p.73) Mírzá Muhammad-Qulí "mostly ... kept silent," and -kept company with no one, but stayed by himself most of the time, alone in his small refuge"(P.71) and, like 'Ali Najaf-Ábádí, some tended to be meek and quiet. There was, too, the more sociable person who, like Hájj 'Abdu'lláh Najaf-Ábádí, "spent his days in friendly association with the other believers; " (p. 66) or, like Ismu'lláhu'l-Asdaq "taught cheerfully and with gaiety." (p.6) "How wonderful was his talk", says 'Abdu'l-Bahá of Nabíl of Qá'in, "how attractive his society."(p.53)

These personality dichotomies, these opposites, continue on so many fronts. While there are occasionally impatient individuals in the main we find patience and long-suffering: There are many souls, in this medium length book of some 200 pages, who are long-suffering, invariably patient and forbearing. Contentment and a sense of thankfulness at whatever life hands out also seems to be part of this particular complex of

3. Conow, *op.cit.*,p.142.

traits. Although Muhammad-'Ali suffered hardship (p.79), his heart was at peace. "With patience, calm and contentment, but difficulty..." he engaged in his trade. 'Azím-i-Tafríshí "was never despondent" (P.155). A basic serenity and calm, a contentment and acceptance characterises believer after believer. The long years of tribulation and isolation of Mishkín-Qalam was the very means to his own survival. He developed a delightful sense of humour which 'Abdu'l-Bahá places some emphasis on in his characterization of people in community and its survival. I often think what 'Abdu'l-Bahá is doing is describing the parameters for our own survival and happiness in community life. They were difficult times the forty years from 1852 to 1892, no easier for them than for us.

Mishkin-Qalam is the hallmark of the suffering artist-soul within us all, striving for sincerity. He has a sense of humour, it would appear, not unlike many Australians we meet today who are the masters of the self-put-down. It certainly keeps the ego manageable, at least ostensibly. It is something to watch for in the Australian personality which people from other countries often misinterpret.

'Abdu'l-Bahá knew that great sacrifices would be required to build the new Order and He laid bare before us these many sketches of souls who gave their all, broke the patterns of their lives, patterns which had often imprisoned them, and hastened to the Most Great Prison. So, too, is this our task: to get out of the prisons of our making. What is the Most Great Prison we are trying to get in? It seems to me we are often trying 'to escape'. I know: I'm a master at escaping. Pioneers are often the greatest escape artists, to use the symbolism of the prison which 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses literally.

The following characteristic is found again and again: the devotional attitude. Individuals keep "vigils most of the night" (p.67), dwell "continually on God, remain submerged in supplications and prayers" (p.43) and always voice their thanks (p.31) "Day and night" Mírzá Mustafa remained in a state of prayer" (P.149) An other characteristic is: joyfulness and ecstasy. Joy is not an uncommon word in the lexicon of characteristics which 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses to describe the many men he got to know over the years. Joyously an Afnán left Persia; the constantly joyful condition of Ustád Bâqir and Ustád Ahmad are but two examples. Ecstasy is also a word which appears not infrequently. The sheer ecstasy of Nabíl-i-Zarandí while he wrote and the "happy, carefree and light of heart" nature of the intellectually inclined Afnán, are only two of the many examples of a state of being, a state of day-to-day existence that was filled with an unquestionable happiness. These are just a few of the many qualities which are placed before us. People who are trying to get into prison; people who have left their homes. The metaphor of 'journey of travelling' is everywhere apparent.

The journey is an infinite one. The wayfarer must endlessly travel if he is

to attain the object of his quest. Within the context of the lives of these 77 people the journey's end was 'Akká, from 1868 to 1892, or Iraq, from 1852 to 1863, or Constantinople or Adrianople in the years 1863 to 1868. These individuals would find somewhere to live near His presence, near the Most Great Prison, near the Friend. Some would return to their home: some would be sent out on yet another journey and others would remain near their Lord. All were transformed in various ways.

Written in 1915, in the evening of his life, *Memorials of the Faithful* was not published until 1924, three years after 'Abdu'l-Bahá's passing. The book was out of print for many years, but was republished in the USA in 1971. Eighty-five years after He wrote the book, more than seventy five years after His passing, the Bahá'í World is coming to appreciate this remarkable testimony to the affect a manifestation of God had on ordinary men and women. That they became far from ordinary was due to Bahá'u'lláh. That we can see their perfections was due to the eye of the Master, an eye which did not behold imperfections. For 'Abdu'l-Bahá was unquestionably easy to please; He enjoyed the rich variety of human types and His observant eye was both warm and tender.

As Marzieh Gail states, this is "a book of prototypes ... a kind of testament of values endorsed and willed to us." These values can also be found all around us in the Bahá'í community today, if we but cultivate that same observant eye, that same sin-covering and loving perception that made 'Abdu'l-Bahá the Master which He was. For it is this quality of acceptance, of non-judgementalism as psychologists call it, combined with humour and letting people be whoever they are and whatever they are which is the source of our own community happiness and survival in these the earliest days of community building to which we are all being called as the millennium opens in the months and years ahead. *Memorials of the Faithful* has a great deal to offer us would-be builders of relationships, community and a World Order. Don't let the long names and the pithy descriptions that 'Abdu'l-Bahá uses put you off. He probably would have given us more but, in the evening of His life, after His western tour, my guess is that He was worn out. It was the last book He gave us. Only the **Tablets of the Divine Plan** remained and these letters gave us a Plan in which to put all the good advice He'd given us in *Memorials to the Faithful*. Like the wisdom of *The Will and Testament*, though, it may take us a century of more to grasp the implications of this surprisingly subtle and, deceptively simple, book.