



Bahá'í Summer Schools, 2001

Worksop Summer School

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Friends at the Worksop Summer School 2001

WITH TWO WEEKS to go there were only four firm bookings for the School and this predicament resulted in a flood of frantic emails, phone calls and letters in an effort to drum up more registrations. The Council for England decided that the School must go ahead despite the prospect of making a financial loss and we can now look back and say that decision was the right one – the School attracted enough bookings to make a small profit. This was due in no small part to the commitment and energy of the friends on the local working party who were determined that the School should go ahead.

The School had a good start with 99 residents and 40 visitors on the first day. The sessions started with Nick Semple and Babak Javid speaking about the past epochs and the Fifth Epoch respectively in a most informative manner. By now the friends were getting to know their surroundings as Worksop College – a new venue for the Bahá'ís – was a maze of corridors and staircases. While the outside of the school was grand and impressive, the inside was a little sombre but the darkness was soon dispelled by the light generated by the friends.

Other speakers included Garry Villiers-Stuart, Azar Melville and Augusto Lopez-Claros. Dr

Wendi Momen gave an informative and witty session on the newly developed work of the National Spiritual Assembly that involves External Affairs. She also praised the friends for the resolute way they have coped with the boundary changes.

The evening entertainment was varied and well prepared, featuring Express Freedom,

Arabic dance, the traditional talent night and a ceilidh.

One unexpected and memorable event was the fearfully noisy fire alarm after midnight on Sunday. All the friends, including some quite frightened children had to gather outside in the dark to be checked off against the printed fire lists (which, incidentally, had just finished printing off when the alarm rang out!). Needless to say, other occupants at the School had set off the alarm and the Bahá'ís' behaviour during this ordeal was impeccable with the youth singing songs to cheer up the cold, sleepy children.

With this School there has been an important revival in the ambition of the friends in the northern part of England to have their own Summer School. No doubt there can be many improvements and some lessons have been learnt but the process has started and next year the momentum will build as the Plan progresses.

Sidcot Summer School

SOME 180 FRIENDS and visitors gathered at the Sidcot site for another Summer School. The programme was titled "Advancing the Process" and this broad, if not difficult theme was well covered with a series of informative talks.

Each morning there were two talks and the afternoon was devoted to individual workshops and to a series of workshops presented by

BASED-UK. The evenings' entertainment was improvised by the friends and helped create a very cosy and friendly atmosphere for the week.

There were some changes to the ethos of the school that the Task Force wanted to bring about, namely that there was to be a code of conduct that would operate and that the school would move toward a more appropriate balance between devotion, study and recreation that can be expected at such a school.

Viv Bartlett started the school off with a key-note address on growth in the community and he charmed, delighted and inspired the friends with his open and inclusive approach. Dr Wendi Momen gave the National Spiritual Assembly session where she spoke of the National Spiritual Assembly's view of the developments of the last two years. She explored how change acted as a catalyst for movement and how such change, although unsettling in the short term, was an opportunity for growth and development.

Adam Thorne provided the historical perspective when he gave two talks on the Guardian's messages to the British Isles community. The excerpts of the messages taken from *Unfolding Destiny* clearly showed the crucial contribution that certain friends made – Ethel Rosenberg, Dr John Esslemont, Hasan Balyuzi, David Hofman – to name a few, to the early

development of a community that was held in such high regard by the Guardian.

Other friends talked of teaching work in certain sectors of our community: Lorna Silverstein had many personal stories as she recounted the challenges of rural growth; Fidelma Meehan spoke engagingly of the multi-faceted work that has been growing in the Swindon community, meeting the many opportunities that are presented in an urban environment. The support that can be expected from the Auxiliary Board and the Training Institute was described by Azar Melville and Kay Hughes respectively.

The Council for England session was one where the friends did the work, consulting on the

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Friends at the Sidcot Summer School 2001

main elements of the propitious conditions for growth and generating many ideas of how we can move slowly but surely toward that goal.

The evening entertainment was homegrown and spontaneous. In this regard Sidcot was the dancing school with break-dancing, African dancing, Oriental dancing and even limbo dancing. The Sidcot Choir performed and the children had their talent show. These evenings were held in the dining room where, each night, the tables were moved back to make room but then, magically, by the end of the evening they had all been replaced.

The last three days of the School took on a special character with the attendance of Mr Afshin, formerly a member of the Continental Board of Counsellors in Asia. His talks were of a style not seen for some years in this country: he spoke with great passion, wit and emotion about the need to develop four loves as a gateway to welcoming Entry by Troops: love for Bahá'u'lláh, love for the Faith, love for each other and love for the Institutions. His simple but profound explanation touched everyone who was present.

The children were ably taught all week by a band of enthusiastic teachers who based their lessons on the theme of journeys, both practical, spiritual and experiential. There were two special days where the children took part on a “Heartstart” programme and learnt circus skills – some eventful Feast entertainment may follow in your community!

The Task Force was pleased that in their behaviour and participation, the youth had responded positively to the desire to balance devotion, study and recreation. The few “incidents” that did occur were dealt with swiftly and lovingly.

All in all the atmosphere of the school was felt to be cheerful and relaxed. For many people the most enjoyable aspect was being with old friends and meeting new ones. As somebody wrote: “Thank you for a soul-reviving week.”

P.S. Lost property: would the person who left 10 towels, 6 swimming costumes, 5 jumpers, 4 umbrellas and a spiral notebook please contact the Residential Schools Task Force on 01386 443 607. Thank you.

Experiencing Sidcot – a very personal view

EVERYBODY experiences Summer School differently. We attend the same lectures, participate in the same discussions, eat the same food, and sleep in similar accommodation, but can feel very differently about the experience. It is what happens to yourself, what you experience, how you feel that counts. My definition of a good summer school is that it is like an indulgence; it is time out for myself. Leaving it, I feel refreshed, renewed, and ready to take on another twelve months of the outside world. For me, Sidcot was a very good Summer School.

I came away with a roll of film images: Viv Bartlett demonstrating with rope and two volunteers from the audience how people try to move towards one's higher self but are constantly jerked back towards their lower self. Everyone understood exactly what he was

trying to get across. Viv again commenting casually that the Guardian had recognised that daily prayer and fasting were not easy habits for Bahá'is from the West to get into. His discussion with his daughter revealed that if you deliberately said your daily prayer in front of your children, they will find it much easier to do themselves – and it's true, I've discovered that already.

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loved. Unconditionally.

The oratorical passion of Mr Afshin, ex-counsellor for India. He spoke of different types of love. Love of Bahá'u'lláh, love of the Faith, love of other people. That diversity is not just about race, culture and language, it is that people are individuals. It clearly struck a chord – there was a declaration after that. Being a lover. It's about the different ways you can love – passionately, unrestrainedly, coolly, logically, with real gusto and calm deliberation. And that's how I experienced Summer School. I felt loved. Unconditionally.

Fidelma Meehan in her charming Irish accent saying the spiritual thirst is everywhere, we must raise the spiritual awareness of our times. The Universal House of Justice in its Ridván message never apologises. “They don’t write ‘We’re terribly sorry, we know it will upset your plans, but if you’ll just squeeze in a little time here for a spot of teaching it would be much appreciated....’ No! They said it was of the utmost urgency to teach the Faith...” You can achieve whatever you desire but the focus must be very strong. It put my excuses into perspective and gave me the feeling that I, too, can teach.

The rain. How could we campers ever forget the rain? It certainly never forgot us. Dripping nylon tents, sodden shoes, wet, floppy trousers. Concocting elaborate plans to avoid returning to the tent. The smell of damp in the tent so strong you could almost see the fungi growing on the tent sides. I stepped outside from the dining hall to begin another trek to the tent. At my feet was grass glistening with rain. Suddenly the sun burst through the clouds. I looked up and saw a densely coloured patchwork of emerald green hills, interlaced with hedges and flat grey stone walls, with sheep looking like white French knots dotted near the blue bolder sky. Somerset can be so pretty.

The youth who wrote and performed the Ali G skit at the talent quest were great! On another level, there was 12 year old Traherne, blind, getting himself around a campus whose geography had many adults mystified. More than once I watched him boldly make his way up to someone in the dining hall and introduce himself. What courage! The parent in me immediately thought “What wise parents he has! They should be so proud of him – and themselves!” A thought that stayed with me after the school was – how do we cope when the dream of entry by troops becomes reality? Singing about diversity is one thing; living it is another. The down to earth reality of diversity can only really hit home AFTER the declarations.

I was reminded of this when listening to Viv Bartlett’s talk of the success they’ve had to date with Swindon. While he spoke, I compared Swindon to what I suddenly recognised was a similar situation in my home country of New Zealand. In New Zealand there has been a history of large numbers of declarations from Maori, only to have these believers fall away from the Faith. It was my impression that they felt uncomfortable with the way the committee institutions of the Faith worked, too formal and rigid for them. If there were enough of them in the community, I noticed they sometimes ran parallel events.

What happens after a number of declarations from a minority (class, race, way of life, whatever) disturbs the balance of power within a community? These people can, with immense enthusiasm, become deepened in the Faith very quickly, and, if voted onto a Local Assembly, can inadvertently challenge “the way we do things round here”. To a new Bahá’í, the ultimate put-down has to be “It’s not in the Writings”; generally, they are in no position to argue otherwise. But from what I’ve seen and read, the workings of the institutions of the Faith are not always as cast in concrete as people would have us believe.

So, on the one hand, we have the new believer, energetic, enthusiastic and frustrated, understanding clearly the roadblocks to entry by troops; and on the other, we have the stalwarts of the Faith being told by implication that the years of service they have put in for the Faith are misguided, ineffectual, or at best unappreciated.

The answer, of course, lies in true consultation, where the old-guard members of the Local Assembly are happy to examine what they do and judge it against the Writings, and not just tradition. But they will have lost forever some of the comfortable familiarity of the processes of the Faith, and given up some of their preferred ways of doing things. For believers to do this with a glad heart is a test of Faith indeed.

Raewyn Blomfield