

The Love of the Master

A Visit with Curtis Kelsey

by Nathan Ashelman

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[Themes: Abdu'l-Baha's all-encompassing love; joy; firmness in the Covenant; service]

[Intro: **Piano music:** Colors/Dance by George Winston, fade out at 1:10~1:15. **Visuals:** slide with title, slides with photos]

[**Projection screen rises, Narrator starts** (↓), Curtis sitting on chair behind screen, **stage dark**]

[0:30] [**Narrator:** Welcome everybody to the 1958 (?) Baha'i Conference X! We are so happy to have you all here in Milwaukee, Wisconsin! Tonight, I have the pleasure of introducing a special guest, Mr. Curtis Kelsey, who drove here all the way from Teaneck, New Jersey. Curtis had the bounty of meeting Abdu'l-Baha 37 years ago, in 1921, in the Holy Land during the last months of the Master's earthly life. Curtis, we're all looking forward to hearing about your experiences...]

[**Stage lights** & Curtis begins to speak]

[6:00] [Part 1: Background]

I'm happy to see you all! Firstly, I'd like to thank my friend Arden Thur [maiden name; now Lee] for inviting me here. She's the beautiful young lady sitting over there [points into audience]. She's so enthusiastic, and boy, she can tell you some stories too! She was just telling me about her trip around the world in 1954, including 3 months in Hong Kong, then meeting the Guardian on her pilgrimage of May 9, and now she's just returned from two years in Cambodia. And we were just talking about our good friend Stanwood Cobb; he met the Master five times...

You know, I'm not much of a public speaker, but I do love to talk about our beloved Faith and so I'm happy to share with you some of my impressions from meeting the Master.

I have to thank my good friend Roy Wilhelm for that privilege. When I was in my mid-twenties, I was working in upstate New York installing water systems. Whenever I was back in New York city, I would often have lunch with Roy in Manhattan. You know he worked on Wall Street as a coffee trader, and was very successful at it; he was a millionaire. Maybe part of that success was due to his devotion to Abdu'l-Baha. [chuckles] Good old Roy, he was so obedient! Once he received a tablet from Abdu'l-Baha, who urged him to work at becoming a “straight-shooter.” So

Roy immediately goes out, buys two pistols, sets up some targets in the pine grove outside his house in Teaneck, and starts going out there every day to practice, shooting away! Well, the neighbors weren't too happy with that! [hearty laugh, slapping knee] I suggested that Abdul'-Baha was familiar with some American idioms, and was perhaps recommending he become more direct in his business practices. He decided to adopt my interpretation; the neighbors were certainly happier with that! (28)

Anyhow, I was saying about lunch with Roy. We would usually go to a nearby restaurant, but that day he said come to his office, he had something important to ask. That sounded mysterious, but also exciting, because I knew Roy was the kind of person who made things happen. When we were alone in the office, Roy asked 'How would you like to go to Haifa and do some work for the Master?'. I thought he must be joking: me just a young man, and a new Baha'i of only a couple years. But he was serious. I protested that it was a long way away, and I didn't have the kind of money to travel there and back. Roy just said: 'You never know about these things – strange things happen.' (35)

Some weeks later I got a cablegram from Haifa. Wow, I handled it so carefully, it was so precious... I opened the envelope... [solemn, slowly] It said: CURTIS KELSEY PERMITTED and was signed 'Abdu'l-Baha Abbas! (36)

I knew then I should prepare and go right away. I put together all my money; it wasn't enough. I sold my new Model-T Ford for \$150—I loved that car so much, I guess from the good memories of one of my first jobs, building Model-Ts at Ford in Detroit. It still wasn't enough money. I tried to sell some of my other possessions, but there were no takers. Roy... Roy... One day over lunch he asked me how I was coming in getting the funds together for my trip. I said: 'It's going well, I don't have enough to go yet, but I'm sure I'll be ready soon.' He knew my independent streak, that I would never ask for help. But he persuaded me to take \$500 from him, to be used just to finance the trip. And with that, I had enough. (36-37)

What Roy hadn't told me was the real reason for my going. You see, one day about a year before all this, he was reading the words of the Bab, written while imprisoned in the mountain fortress of Maku. Here, I have it with me, let me find it [flips through his notebook of compilations] My kids tease me about my notebook, they call it 'Pop's Bible' [laughs], but this is where I collect my favorite quotes. I've got it organized in 15 sections. Let me see... meditation and prayer; fear of God; nearness to God; evolution; mind, soul, and spirit; free will; backbiting; obedience: yep, that's it! (39, 157)

“In His presence ... there is not at night even a lighted lamp! And yet, in places which in varying degrees reach out unto Him (in other words in places of worship), unnumbered lamps are shining! All that is on earth hath been created for Him, and all partake with delight of His benefits, and yet they are so veiled from Him as to refuse Him even a lamp!” (39)

Roy was so moved, he wrote to Abdu'-Baha immediately, asking for permission to donate an electrical plant to light the Shrine of the Bab. Soon he received a cablegram back, the Master replying that three plants were necessary. Roy never wasted time, and within weeks, the plants were on a ship for Haifa! But they sat there for a year, though various people offered to help install it; the Master said it was not yet time. (40)

So here I was, my steamer ticket purchased, just a few days before leaving. And Roy told me about the electrical generators, and that the Master said that now was the time to install them, [surprise] and I was being asked to do it! How could it be me? Surely, I said, they can find someone qualified, an electrical engineer, not someone like me who has never even been to high school. Roy pointed out that I had always been good with my hands and had experience managing construction projects the past couple years. He wasn't disturbed in the least. He said he had complete confidence in me, and we should obey Abdu'-Baha's wishes. I realized Roy operated on a different level, the level of faith. (39)

[3:40] [Side Story: Roy Wilhelm finds Faith]

Roy had Faith. You know how he became a Baha'i, right? No? Oh, well let me tell you, it's quite an amazing story. His mother became a Baha'i first—like my mother and me—she was one of the earliest believers in the US. But Roy wasn't interested. He was a wealthy and successful business man, and a creature of habit. Every day he would get up at the same time, put on a conservative suit, buy the Herald Tribune from the same newsstand, take the same train to Wall Street, work, take the same train home in the afternoon, stop at the same flower shop to buy his mother flowers, arrive home, go to his room to replace the suit with a dinner jacket, and sit on his bed to remove his shoes and put on slippers. (24-25)

One day was different, and it wasn't because Roy did something different. He was sitting on his bed, changing his shoes just like usual, when suddenly the room around him was transformed! **[sound effect: wind blowing through trees]** The room was small, the walls were whitewashed, there were oriental carpets on the floor, a gentle breeze blew the curtains in the windows on three sides of the room, there was a low divan in the corner and a chair... Standing next to Roy was a majestic figure with a long black beard, dressed in oriental robes. The figure approached Roy, taking off His ring and placing it on Roy's finger and removing Roy's ring and placing it on His finger. (25)

Roy couldn't move. He sat on the bed, too stunned to feel fear, so awed that he couldn't say a word. The vision faded away, and he tried to figure out what had just happened, but he was mystified. He was a practical man, and didn't believe in psychic experiences. He figured people who had those kind of experiences were maybe less than mentally balanced. So he didn't tell anyone about this, most especially not his mother, because he knew she would use it as an excuse to draw him into that

strange religion of hers! (25)

In 1907—that would have been when I was 13 years old, and two years before my mother became a Baha'i—his mother went on pilgrimage, and Roy accompanied her on the long trip to keep her safe. They were welcomed in Haifa by the Master, who gave Roy such a hug that he thought several ribs must have been cracked! It was a bit strange, being hugged by a man, but it happened too fast for Roy to avoid it, and besides, after the hug he felt so welcome that he figured the place was perhaps not so strange or dangerous as he had feared. Abdu'l-Baha urged Roy to go to Bahji, and on the way the carriage stopped at the Garden of Ridvan. There, a Persian believer led Roy to the little house by the stream where Baha'u'llah lived when he stayed at the garden. When Roy entered the room, he jumped with a shock of recognition: it was the same room where that majestic figure had exchanged rings with him! Roy retreated quickly to the garden, shaken, knowing he must ask Abdu'l-Baha about it. (26)

'You had a spiritual experience,' the Master told him, 'Baha'u'llah has wedded you to His Faith.' From that day forward, Roy was a Baha'i, possessing an unshakable faith. (26)

[Side Story: I become a Baha'i]

(optional, add if time)

[Part 2: Meeting in the Holy Land]

[2:15]

Now where was I? ... Oh yes: Roy hadn't told me about the real reasons for my trip. Well, it wasn't easy to get to Haifa. I knew that, under the best case, it would take 3 weeks, but I couldn't find any ships going to that part of the world, the best I could do was get a steamer to France. And when I got there, the ticket agent said there would be no ships to Alexandria for weeks, that I should take time to visit Paris and see the country. That was no good! So I took a train to Naples, Italy, hoping I could find something there. But the agent said there were no possibilities of getting aboard a ship to Alexandria, Egypt. He refused my request to come back the next day to check, but he did take the name of my hotel. Well, two days later he called me! He said 'How did you know the Esperia would stop here?' I said 'I had no idea.' He explained that a first-class passenger had developed appendicitis and had to be dropped off, and asked if I would like to take his place. You bet I did! (43)

[**sound effect: lapping of waves**]

The trip was beautiful, sunny days and calm seas. I met a passenger on the ship, a Presbyterian missionary, and we became friends. He was on his way to Beirut where he had lived for years, so he knew his way around. He told me all about the Near East, and took me on the train with him, since

he was passing through Haifa. Everything worked out so well. (45)

[sound effect: Arab bazaar]

So I arrived in Haifa. Back in 1921, it wasn't a city like it is now in the 50's—you see I was there a second time a few years ago. Haifa was just a small village, probably not changed much in the past thousand years! Arab women walked around in veils, carrying water jugs on their heads. Some men sat in the shade to get out of the scorching sun, smoking bubble pipes and others led camels through the streets carrying goods to market. Mount Carmel was a barren rock covered with scrubby vegetation; the Shrine of the Bab a flat, bare stone structure. (47)

[2:15] Welcome by the Master (49-51)

I was met at the train station by Fujita and Dr. Hakim; they took me to the Pilgrim House. When we arrived, the large table had already been spread for lunch: in the middle of the table was a large platter of Persian rice with curried lamb, chopped nuts, candied orange peel, and saffron sprinkled on top and a plate stacked high with unleavened bread. Each of us had a cup of tea and small bowl of yogurt next to our plate.

I was welcomed warmly by the people there, and they were asking me about the New York Baha'is, when suddenly a door opened, and 'Abdu'l-Baha appeared, walking my way. He was dressed in a cream-colored aba and white turban; his eyes were smiling. He shook my hand and said 'Marhaba! Marhaba!' (which means You are welcome!). He sat me down beside Himself, asked me about the friends in New York, and how I liked Haifa. I said I liked the atmosphere. He got a far-away look in his eyes, and said 'You feel this way because the prophets of the past have visited and walked in this area.' Then He turned to Me and said: 'Did you notice how easy it was for you to get here?' I paused for a moment, then replied: 'Yes, I noticed this.' Just then I realized that I reached Haifa in 20 days, within the three weeks I had planned, but what all the experts had told me was not possible. [slowly] I knew then that I had been given special assistance in reaching the Holy Land.

After lunch, I retired to my room. It was time for the noon rest, but I wasn't yet used to that and couldn't sleep. My mind kept returning to my first meeting with 'Abdu'l-Baha. In his presence I felt his great nobility, yet I felt completely at ease, completely accepted, completely loved. Before my arrival, I often felt how unworthy I was to meet Him; but I didn't feel that when in His presence, in fact I forgot completely about myself.

[SKIP: Fujita's beard (74, 77)]

Fujita and Dr. Hakim were my room mates, and we became great friends. We shared a small room, about 14 feet square; each of us had a bed and a dresser. Fujita was always making us laugh, and the Master laugh. ...]

[2:40] Walking to Bahji (54, 56-57)

I wasn't immediately assigned any tasks to do. I unpacked and checked the generators and equipment that Roy had sent. Then I spent my time fixing any of the various machines that needed it. After about two weeks I was feeling impatient. I was out in the middle of the street, about 150 feet from the Master's house, and said to Ruhi Afnan [grandson of Abdu'l-Baha]: 'Ruhi, when do you think 'Abdu'l-Baha is going to let me start on the lighting project?' Well, just at that moment the door of the Master's house opens, and AB calls out in a booming voice: 'We start tomorrow!' Then He smiled and walked back into the house! There was no way the Master could have heard me from that distance. I understood then that He knew me completely, knew me better than I know myself. He was the Mystery of God.

In the late afternoon we took the train to Akka. We arrived at sunset. After a time, a servant arrived with the Master's white donkey. Night fell, but a full moon lit the land, the temperature was cool but not cold, we could hear the call of jackals in the distance. **[sound effect: jackals]** I'll never forget walking to Bahji beside the Master that night. We were silent, and I felt no need for words. It seemed like all my worldly cares were washed away, and my heart was only filled with the vibrating love of AB. ... After a while, AB pulled his aba over his shoulders, and said, in English, 'Beautiful night, beautiful moon, beautiful clouds.' We all remained silent, letting His words sink into our hearts. Then he turned to me and said 'Are you finding it difficult to walk?'

What could I say? I was walking, but I felt embraced, surrounded by His love. I couldn't describe what I really felt, I could only reply: 'I am very happy to be walking with You.' I knew that he understood my feelings, because He responded: 'You feel this way because you are filled with love.' I floated all the rest of the way to Bahji! The next day, I started my work setting up the generators and lighting, a job that, in total, took me several months.

[1:00] Language of the Heart (80)

When I was in Haifa, one of my favorite times was the evening, because every night AB would give a talk at the Pilgrim House. I would sit like the others, with my arms folded across my chest: that's a sign of respect for the speaker in that part of the world. AB sometimes spoke in Persian, sometimes Arabic, which of course I couldn't understand a word of. But I guess the Master knew my intentions were pure, and knew I was getting something out of attending. One time, mid-way though His talk, he looked at me and said, in English, 'Do you understand what is being said here?' I said: 'No, Master, I do not speak the languages.' He said: 'Your heart understands, and the language of the heart is much stronger than the language of words.' So I came to realize that true communication does not require words...

[2:15] Meeting Alone with the Master (1-2)

But let me tell you about my most special meeting with the Master. He had called me to His house,

and asked me to come to His room, alone. I wondered if I had done something wrong, but the installation work was going well, and I couldn't remember doing or saying anything that offended anyone or created any feeling of disunity.

I entered the small, plain room, with an iron post bed with thin mattress and a simple chest of drawers and a pitcher of water on it. We sat together in a corner of the room. AB just looked at me silently, not saying a word. I remained silent too. I was wondering why I had been called, but just didn't feel like saying anything.

He stared at me, and to meet His gaze was too much for me to bear. I wanted to look at the walls, or out the window. But His look was like a divine command, and I obeyed, I looked into His eyes. I felt: 'He isn't upset with me; there's another reason for what is happening.' I was no longer worried; a feeling of peace came over me. I surrendered myself to His gaze; His eyes reflected a power beyond this world. He looked at me, and saw me completely. I could not turn away. There was nothing in that room but AB. I had forgotten myself completely, there was only Him. In his gaze, a love flowed from Him to me, a love that gave me happiness, joy, and ecstasy I had never known. Nothing else mattered; time had no meaning. I don't know whether it was a minute or an hour, but finally the Master smiled, and said that I could leave.

[3:40] [Part 3: Effects on my life]

That was it. I've reflected, again and again, on that meeting, over the years. It seems so simple, maybe, but I was a different person after that. I couldn't explain it then, but when I got back to the hustle and bustle of life in New York, to the material world with all its confusion, tests and trials, I knew that true reality is what I experienced in Bahji, in Haifa, in Akka. Whenever I'm surrounded by difficulties, His face comes to me, and I find courage, confidence, the will to solve those problems. The despair and confusion among the Baha'is of New York after the Master's passing, and even backbiting, even against Roy, can you imagine! ... the passing of my mother, the only one in my family who truly understood me ... my father, in his will, leaving the entire ownership of his Continental Pipe Manufacturing Company, which I had build up with him over so many years, to his second wife who knew nothing about how to run it ... the years during the Great Depression when I didn't know where I would find the money for the next day's food for my wife and four children ... And now, with the passing of the beloved Guardian not yet a year ago, our community is again being tested, just like after the passing of the Master, some even asking, in public, 'How could there not be another Guardian?' ... (2, 107, 113, 172)

At times like these, we must remember Baha'u'llah's words: 'He doeth whatsoever He willeth.' Let us remember AB's words: 'Be not idle, but active, and fear not', and so act, knowing that the tests will make us stronger, that His blessings will follow. Five years of the Guardian's plan lie in front of us. (172)

And let us remember the love of the Master, that spiritual joy He showed to me in His room in Haifa, and know that His love is always with us, and will see us through. I have here something from the writings of the Master that says it more beautifully than I can. Let me read it to you.
[Reading from Pop's Bible] AB says:

[**Stage lights fade, projection screen falls, Curtis reads (↓)**]

“The blessings of Baha'u'llah are a shoreless sea, and even life everlasting is only a dewdrop therefrom. The waves of that sea are continually lapping against the hearts of the friends, and from those waves there come intimations of the spirit and ardent pulsings of the soul, until the heart giveth way, and willing or not, turneth humbly in prayer unto the Kingdom of the Lord. Wherefore do all ye can to disengage your inner selves, that ye may at every moment reflect new splendors from the Sun of Truth.

Ye live, all of you, within the heart of 'Abdul-Baha, and with every breath do I turn my face toward the Threshold of Oneness and call down blessings upon you, each and all.” (Writings of Abdu'l-Baha #162, pp.192-3)

[**Piano music:** same as start, **Visuals:** slides with photos: x; y; the Master smiling]

Reference Material

[All references (#) are page numbers from “He Loved and Served: The Story of Curtis Kelsey” by Nathan Rutstein, unless otherwise noted]

Appearance:

lanky; free-flowing, whole-hearted laughter, often with slap of knee (4); prematurely gray in mid-30's (161); tall, slender, slightly stooped; wore tie & shirt even for physical activities; rich baritone voice, strong & assured; happy to talk in front of audience (161)

Character:

little formal education: finished 8th grade & went to trade school (3); adventurous, sought new experiences; enjoyed making useful things (3); open, pure-hearted (4); loved being outdoors (4) & camping; strong-willed, independent-minded (6); spiritual capacity (6); teasing, prankster; admired president Lincoln (5); antipathy to hypocrites (7); in love with Writings (15, 22), memorized, compiled (155-6); approachable, spirit of sharing & service (155); natural, pure, sincere (160); loved to talk about religion (157); used anecdotes & earthy analogies (160, 161); talks peppered with memorized quotes of Baha'u'llah and AB (160); logical, easy to follow (161)

Timeline:

- 1894, March: born in Salt Lake City (father designing city's first water works) (4, 185)
- 1907: Roy Wilhelm's pilgrimage (26)
- 1909: mother Valeria becomes Baha'i (8)
- c early 1918: becomes Baha'i (14)
- 1918, April 15: drafted to US Army, basic training at Camp Lewis, Tacoma WA (16)
- 1918, summer: serving in France
- c 1919: elected to NY LSA (22, 23)
- 1921~1922: first visit to Holy land, installs lighting at Bahji, Mt. Carmel
- 1924: mother passes away at age 54 (119)
- c 1927: at age 33 marries Harriet (122)
- 1940's: Roy passes away (167)
- c 1952: pilgrimage with Harriet, extended to 26 days at Guardian's request to install water pump at Bahji (171)
- 1968: third visit to holy land, lighting plants still working (179)
- 1968-9: teaching trips to Alaska, California (days) and Hawaii (2 weeks) (179-82)
- 1970: organizes Florida Love Fest, 500+ people, Hands of Cause John Roberts & William Sears, ABM William Tucker, musicians Dizzy Gillespie, Seals & Crofts, daughter Carol (180-84)
- 1970, February 20: passes away in Florida, age 75 (185)