

'Abdu'l-Bahá's Love for the African-Americans

By Susan Gammage ¹

'Abdu'l-Bahá was most uncompromising on the issue of racial equality during his visit to America:

As part of the American South, Washington, D.C. was also a city in which racial segregation was a fact of life, and it was on the issue of racial equality that 'Abdu'l-Bahá was most uncompromising during his visit to America. ('Abdu'l-Bahá in America: The Diary of Agnes Parsons, https://bahai-library.com/hutchinson_diary_parsons)

Holding racially integrated meetings wasn't easy, as no hotels would allow such a meeting:

In such a milieu, the Bahá'ís found it challenging to comply with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's instruction that they should hold racially integrated meetings. Even locating a public site for a community dinner honoring 'Abdu'l-Bahá proved difficult, since no hotels in the city would allow an integrated meeting. ('Abdu'l-Bahá in America: The Diary of Agnes Parsons, https://bahai-library.com/hutchinson_diary_parsons)

At one point, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was evicted from His hotel because his visitors were from such diverse backgrounds:

In late May 1912, in New York, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was evicted from His hotel because, as Mahmud noted, of the "coming and going of diverse people" and the "additional labors and troubles" for the staff and the "incessant inquiries" directed to the hotel management. "But," Mahmud continued, "when the people of the hotel saw His great kindness and favor at the time of His departure, they were ashamed of their conduct and begged Him to stay longer, but He would not accept.'" (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 95, #88)²

On another occasion He shocked some of the white socialites by insisting that Louis Gregory be seated next to him at a society luncheon:

The Master's every act was meaningful. On one auspicious occasion in Washington, D.C. He demonstrated what justice and love can do. The chargé d'affaires of the Persian Legation in the city and his wife had arranged a luncheon in His honour. Their guest list included members of the social and political life in the capital, as well as a number of Baha'ís.

Louis Gregory, a cultivated gentleman and employee in the government – he later became the first black Hand of the Cause – had been invited to visit the Master. He was surprised at the time scheduled for a visit, as he knew of the luncheon plans,

¹ Prepared by David Bowie (2023) for posting, with permission of author, at https://bahai-library.com/gammage_various_essays

² All extracts from this book are from the George Ronald 1982 edition. Page numbers in various on-line versions differ from the published edition used here.

but naturally he arrived on time. Their conference seemed to go on and on – as if indeed the Master might be prolonging it deliberately. Eventually the butler announced that luncheon was being served. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá led the way, the invited guests following closely behind. Mr Gregory was perplexed: should he leave or wait for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to return? The guests were seated when suddenly the honoured Guest rose, looked around and then asked in English, ‘Where is My friend, Mr Gregory?’, adding ‘My friend, Mr Gregory, must lunch with Me!’ It just so happened that Louis Gregory had not been on the luncheon list, so naturally he had remained behind. Now the chargé d’affaires hastened after him. The Master rearranged the place setting at His right, the seat of honour, of course – ignoring utterly the delicate laws of protocol – and the luncheon started only after Mr Gregory had been seated. Then, in a most natural manner, as if nothing at all unusual had happened in the capital that day in 1912, with tact and humour, the Master ‘electrified the already startled guests’ by talking about the unity of mankind. (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, p. 96, #89)

At another time, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá hosted a unity Feast and insisted that both black and white sit side-by-side in a previously segregated hotel:

On a certain occasion in America ‘Abdu’l-Bahá ‘announced that He wished to give a Unity Feast for the friends. The Committee arranging for the affair had taken it to one of the city’s most exclusive hotels, famed for its color bar. The colored friends, troubled by the prospect of insults and discriminatory treatment, decided not to attend. When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá learned of this, He insisted that all the friends should attend. The banquet was held with all the friends, white and colored, seated side by side, in great happiness and without one unpleasant incident.’ (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, p. 95, #87)

With this one stroke, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá swept away both segregation by race and categorization by social rank:

Juliet Thompson wrote: “Gently yet unmistakably, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had assaulted the customs of a city that had been scandalized only a decade earlier by President Roosevelt’s dinner invitation to Booker T. Washington. Moreover as a friend who helped Madame Khan with the luncheon recalled, the place setting that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had rearranged so casually had been made according to the strict demands of Washington protocol. Thus, with one stroke ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had swept away both segregation by race and categorization by social rank. (Gayle Morrison, To Move The World, Louis G. Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Unity in America, pp 53-54)

He found racial differences a thing of beauty:

Mr. Robert Turner, the butler of philanthropist Mrs. Phoebe Hearst, distinguished himself by being the first Western black man to become a Baha’i. May Maxwell recalled later that ‘on the morning of our arrival [on pilgrimage], after we had

refreshed ourselves, the Master summoned us all to Him in a long room overlooking the Mediterranean. He sat in silence gazing out of the window, then looking up He asked if all were present. Seeing that one of the believers was absent, He said, "Where is Robert?" ... In a moment Robert's radiant face appeared in the doorway and the Master rose to greet him, bidding him be seated, and said, "Robert, your Lord loves you. God gave you a black skin, but a heart white as snow." Such was the tenacity of his faith that even the subsequent estrangement of his beloved mistress from the Cause she had spontaneously embraced failed to becloud its radiance, or to lessen the intensity of the emotions which the loving-kindness showered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá upon him had excited in his breast.' (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 90, #79)

The following delightful story about an incident during 'Abdu'l-Bahá's stay in New York illustrates the fact that He was not 'colour-blind', but rather He found racial differences a thing of beauty. When the Master was on His way to speak to several hundred men at the Bowery Mission He was accompanied by a group of Persian and American friends. Not unnaturally a group of boys was intrigued by the sight of this group of Orientals with their flowing robes and turbans and started to follow them. They soon became noisy and obstreperous. A lady in the Master's party was highly embarrassed at the rude behaviour of the boys. Dropping behind she stopped to talk with them and told them a little about who 'Abdu'l-Bahá was. Not entirely expecting them to take her up on the invitation, she nevertheless gave them her home address and said that if they liked to come the following Sunday she would arrange for them to see Him.

Thus, on Sunday, some twenty or thirty of them appeared on the doorstep, rather scruffy and noisy, but with signs that they had tidied up for the occasion nonetheless. Upstairs in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's room the Master was seen at the door greeting each boy with a handclasp or an arm around the shoulder, with warm smiles and boyish laughter. His happiest welcome seemed to be directed to the thirteen-year-old boy near the end of the line. He was quite dark-skinned and didn't seem too sure he would be welcome. The Master's face lighted up and in a loud voice that all could hear exclaimed with delight that 'here was a black rose'. The boy's face shone with happiness and love. Silence fell across the room as the boys looked at their companion with a new awareness.

The Master did not stop at that, however. On their arrival He had asked that a big five-pound box of delicious chocolates be fetched. With this He walked around the room, ladling out chocolates by the handful to each boy. Finally, with only a few left in the box, He picked out one of the darkest chocolates, walked across the room and held it to the cheek of the black boy. The Master was radiant as He lovingly put His arm around the boy's shoulders and looked with a humorously piercing glance around the group without making any further comment. (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, pp. 88-89, #78)

He was happiest at meetings where both white and colored people were present:

Joseph Hannen records: "On Tuesday, April 23rd, at noon, Abdu'l-Bahá addressed the student-body of more than 1,000, the faculty and a large number of distinguished guests, at Howard University. This was a most notable occasion, and here, as everywhere when both white and colored people were present, Abdu'l-Bahá seemed happiest. The address was received with breathless attention by the vast audience, and was followed by a positive ovation and a recall." (Hannen, "Abdu'l-Bahá in Washington, D.C." p. 7; Agnes Parson's Diary, p. 29, Footnote 44. <https://www.bahaistories.com/subject/happiness>)

He saw black people as His friends:

While 'Abdu'l-Bahá was living in a Paris hotel, among those who often came to see Him was a poor, black man. He was not a Baha'i, but he loved the Master very much. One day when he came to visit, someone told him that the management did not like to have him – a poor black man – come, because it was not consistent with the standards of the hotel. The poor man went away. When 'Abdu'l-Bahá learned of this, He sent for the man responsible. He told him that he must find His friend – He was not happy that he should have been turned away. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said, 'I did not come to see expensive hotels or furnishings, but to meet My friends. I did not come to Paris to conform to the customs of Paris, but to establish the standard of Baha'u'llah.' (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, pp. 94-95, #86)

He gave addresses to audiences of black people:

Though most of 'Abdul-Bahá's time was spent with the rich, famous and white people, He gave special attention to their black servants, treating them no differently than their employers. On 4 August 'Abdul-Bahá addressed a group of 28 black people, and spoke of the importance of unity and amity between black and white people. He told them of the upcoming marriage of Louisa Mathew, a white woman, and Louis Gregory, a black man. The white people in the audience were amazed at the influence the Cause of Baha'u'llah had on everyone, while the black people were very pleased to hear about such integration. Some Americans considered the creation of unity between blacks and whites to be nearly miraculous and as difficult to accomplish as "splitting the moon in half", but here was 'Abdul-Bahá showing that it could happen. (Earl Redman, 'Abdul-Bahá in Their Midst, p. 161)

At one meeting he called a young boy a "black rose":

Howard Colby Ives tells ... a story when about 30 of the boys arrived for their meeting: ... Among the last to enter the room was a colored lad of about 13 years. He was quite dark and, being the only boy of his race among them, he evidently feared that he might Not be welcome. When Abdul-Bahá saw him, His face lighted up with the heavenly smile. He raised His hand and exclaimed in a loud voice, so that none could fail to hear; that here was a black rose. The room fell into instant

silence. The black face became illumined with happiness and love hardly of this world. The other boys looked at him with new eyes. I venture to say that he had been called black – many things, but never before a black rose. (Earl Redman, Abdul-Bahá in Their Midst, p. 88)

He appointed Agnes Parsons to promote the unity of the black and white races:

Agnes Parsons became a fine speaker about the Faith and always had an invitation for traveling teachers to give talks in her home.

During her second pilgrimage in 1920, 'Abdul-Bahá told her that she should organize the convention for the unity of the colored and white races. For a woman of her social standing to promote the unity of the black and one in the white was tradition-breaking. (Earl Redman, 'Abdul-Bahá in Their Midst, p. 91)

At that time, she still upheld the long-standing social conventions of racial segregation:

At that time, Washington was the most racially and socially mixed Baha'i community in America, but it had deep racial unity problems. The upper classes, including people like Mr. and Mrs. Parsons, still upheld the long-standing social conventions of racial segregation that were not easily overcome. (Earl Redman, Abdul-Bahá in Their Midst, p. 98)

Her husband's attitude was that they should all go back to Africa:

Arthur Parsons once commented to Abdul-Bahá that he wished all the blacks would return to Africa, to which the Master wryly replied that such an exodus would have to begin with Wilbur, the trusted butler of the Parsons household.. (Earl Redman, Abdul-Bahá in Their Midst, p. 98)

Remarkably she was able to transcend her social milieu in order to carry out this mandate:

It is remarkable, then, that 'Abdu'l-Bahá subsequently chose Agnes Parsons to spearhead the Racial Amity campaign initiated by the Baha'i community and just as remarkable that she transcended her social milieu in order to carry out this mandate. (Earl Redman, Abdul-Bahá in Their Midst, pp. 98-99)

He encouraged the first inter-racial Bahá'í marriage of its kind, between Louis Gregory, (an African-American man) and Louisa Mathews, (a white British woman):

Louis Gregory was blessed with going on pilgrimage. Towards its end 'Abdu'l-Bahá summoned Louis Gregory and Louisa Mathew, a white English pilgrim. He questioned them, and, to their surprise, expressed the wish that they should join their lives together. In deference to His wishes they were married, and he sent them forth as a symbol of the spiritual unity, cooperation, dignity in relationships and service He desired for the races of mankind. That marriage presented many challenges. It brought all the obstacles to understanding and amity, and often

cruel pressures. But it endured because the two souls it joined were ever guided and protected by a love beyond themselves and the pressures of the world. Theirs was a demonstration of the love which is prompted by the knowledge of God and reflected in the soul. They saw in each other the Beauty of God; and, clinging to this, they were sustained throughout the trials, the accidental conditions of life and the changes and chances of human experience.' (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p. 97, #90)

Early believers had to first overcome their fear of black people:

Pauline and Joseph Hannen were the prime movers of racial integration in Washington in the early years of the Faith there. Initially, Pauline feared black people, but her study of Baha'u'llah's writings forced her to change her attitude. Pauline taught the Faith to her black washerwoman, then she and Joseph began inviting blacks to meetings in their home – a rather daring thing to do at that time. (Earl Redman, 'Abdul-Bahá in Their Midst, pp. 91-92)

Many whites were afraid to host multiracial gatherings in their homes for fear of what others would say. Many blacks were also reluctant to attend meetings because of their fear of insults and discriminatory treatment. (Earl Redman, Abdul-Bahá in Their Midst, p. 98)

Some people were evicted for having black Bahá'ís in their homes:

One day, Dr. Zia Bagdadi invited Mr. Louis Gregory, a black Bahá'í, to his home. When his landlord heard about this, he gave notice to Dr. Bagdadi. He was to vacate his residence because he had a black man in his home. (Earl Redman, 'Abdul-Bahá in Their Midst, p. 108)

Others had to spend their wedding night on a park bench:

In the early 30s Mother, who was divorced from her first husband, Theodore Obrig, married the Reverend Reginald G. Barrow. The wedding ceremony was performed by her father Howard Colby Ives. It is family history that they spent their wedding night on a park bench, as they could not obtain a room in a hotel in Boston. Bishop Barrow, was a man of color, who was born in the West Indies. (Reginald Grant Barrow, Mother's Stories: Stories of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Early Believers told by Muriel Ives Barrow Newhall to her son, p. 6)

His efforts bore fruit, though. Look what happened in South Africa, under Apartheid:

Faced with the segregated social pattern and laws of Apartheid in South Africa, the integrated population of Bahá'ís had to decide how to be composed in their administrative structures – whether the National Spiritual Assembly would be all black or all white. The Bahá'í community decided that instead of dividing the South African Bahá'í community into two population groups, one black and one white,

they instead limited membership in the Bahá'í Administration to black adherents, and placed the entire Bahá'í community under the leadership of its black population.

(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bah%C3%A1%CA%BC%C3%AD_Faith_in_South_Africa)

So with all of His love for the black people, why are they still so oppressed in America today? This might give us a clue:

...'Abdul-Bahá visited Charles Tinsley, a black employee of Phoebe Hearst who probably came into the Faith through Robert Turner, Mrs. Hearst's longtime butler and the first African-American Bahá'í. Charles was laid up at home with a broken leg when the Master arrived. When 'Abdul-Bahá asked how he was, Charles replied that he was fine except for the broken leg that kept him from working for the Cause. 'Abdul-Bahá told him to:

"Cheer up! Praise be to God, you are dear to me. I will tell you a story:-

A certain ruler wished to appoint one of his subjects to a high office; so, in order to train him, the ruler cast them into prison and caused him to suffer much. The man was surprised at this, for he expected great favors. The ruler had taken him from prison and beaten him with sticks. This greatly astonished the man, for he thought the ruler loved him. After this he was hanged on the gallows until he was nearly dead. After he recovered he asked the ruler, if you love me why did you do these things? The ruler replied: 'I wish to make you Prime Minister. By having gone through these ordeals you are better fitted for that office. I wish you to know how it is yourself. When you are obliged to punish, you will know how it feels to endure these things. I love you so I wished you to become perfect.'

[To Mr. Tinsley] Even so with you. After this ordeal you will reach maturity. God sometimes causes us to suffer much and have many misfortunes that we may become strong in his Cause. You will soon recover and be spiritually stronger than ever before. You will work for God and carry the Message to many of your people." (Earl Redman, 'Abdul-Bahá in Their Midst, p. 224)