

'Abdu'l-Bahá's Love for The Poor

By Susan Gammage ¹

'Abdu'l-Bahá met with many groups of people, but He had a special love for the poor and downtrodden.

Poverty made 'Abdu'l-Bahá exceedingly sad and He wants us to become more sensitive to this issue:

'When He reached the Occident, however, 'Abdu'l-Bahá faced a condition which troubled Him greatly, because it was beyond His power to assuage the misery He saw constantly about Him. Housed luxuriously at Cadogan Gardens, London, He knew that within a stone's throw of Him were people who had never had enough to eat -- and in New York there was exactly the same situation. These things made Him exceedingly sad, and He said: "The time will come in the near future when humanity will become so much more sensitive than at present that the man of great wealth will not enjoy his luxury, in comparison with the deplorable poverty about him. He will be forced, for his own happiness, to expend his wealth to procure better conditions for the community in which he lives.'" (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982 edition, pp. 56-57, #30)

He hurt with them:

Many years later, Abdul-Bahá's concern for the poor and suffering was described by May Maxwell in a letter describing the conversation that had taken place in their home:

"I remember when the Master was in Montréal and there'd been a strike for months in Dublin, women and children starving and a generally desperate condition. It affected me painfully; I had slept little and could barely eat, and had that terrific helpless feeling, not knowing what to do about it. All this Sutherland told to the Master, begging Him to tell me that my attitude was all wrong; and as he spoke the Master turned very white and great beads of perspiration formed on His brow through His own agony in human sufferings; then He said, "If more people felt as your wife does, the world would not be in this dark and terrible state." (Earl Redman, Abdul-Bahá in Their Midst, p. 186)

His motto was "frugality for Himself, generosity for others".

'Abdu'l-Bahá gave freely of what He had -- love, time, care and concern, food and money, clothing and flowers, a bed, a rug! His motto appeared to be: frugality for Himself, generosity for others. Stories of the Master's self-denial in favour of others' well-being are legion. He was 'bountiful as the rain in His generosity to the

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

poor...' Because He and His family were rich in the love of God, they accepted material deprivation for themselves gladly. (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982 edition, pp. 57-58)

Service to others was always the pattern of His life:

Service to God, to Baha'u'llah, to family, to friends and enemies, indeed to all mankind – this was the pattern of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's life. He wished only to be the Servant of God and man. To serve – rather than being demeaning and unfulfilling – was honour, joy and fulfilment. This motivated His entire day from Dawn to after midnight. He used to say, 'Nothing is too much trouble when one loves, and there is always time.' (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982 edition, p. 90)

He knew them all and treated them with kindness and respect:

A door opens and a man comes out. He is of middle stature, strongly built. He wears flowing light-coloured robes. On his head is a light buff fez with a white cloth wound about it. He is perhaps sixty years of age. His long grey hair rests on his shoulders. His forehead is broad, full, and high, his nose slightly aquiline, his moustaches and beard, the latter full though not heavy, nearly white. His eyes are grey and blue, large, and both soft and penetrating. His bearing is simple, but there is grace, dignity, and even majesty about his movements. He passes through the crowd, and as he goes utters words of salutation. We do not understand them, but we see the benignity and the kindness of his countenance. He stations himself at a narrow angle of the street and motions to the people to come towards him . . . As they come they hold their hands extended. In each open palm he places some small coins. He knows them all. He caresses them with his hand on the face, on the shoulders, on the head. Some he stops and questions. An aged negro who hobbles up, he greets with some kindly inquiry; the old man's broad face breaks into a sunny smile, his white teeth glistening against his ebony skin as he replies. He stops a woman with a babe and fondly strokes the child. As they pass, some kiss his hand. To all he says, "Marhabbah, marhabbah" - "Well done, well done!" So they all pass him. (Myron Henry Phelps and Bahíyyih Khánum, Life and Teachings of Abbas Effendi, pp. 3-4. https://bahai-library.com/khanum_phelps_abbas_effendi)

As interested as 'Abdu'l-Bahá was in helping the individual, He had a bigger vision always in His mind:

Rúhíyyih Khánum said she had a dream one night: she dreamed that the dam had burst and that there was a great flood, She rushed down to the water's edge to try to save someone, but the current swept them past. She reached out to try to grasp and save another. She grasped one by the hair, and, with great effort, brought that one to shore. Then she tried to reach another, but the current swept him by. She looked up at the side of the mountain, and there she saw 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who looked

like a Prophet of God, with his white turban and flowing beard, with his back to the flood, working very hard. She rushed up the mountain side, grasped His sleeves and said, "Oh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, come and help me save some of these people who are drowning in the flood." 'Abdu'l-Bahá went right on, working very rapidly and said nothing. She grasped his sleeve again and said, "Oh 'Abdu'l-Bahá, these people are drowning, come help me save some of these people who are drowning in the flood." 'Abdu'l-Bahá, without stopping his work turned to her with a smile and Said, "'Abdu'l-Bahá is building the machine to stop the flood." (That is what is taking place in the world today) (Ruhaniyyih Ruth Moffett, Visiting the Bahá'í World, 1954-09 http://bahai-library.com/moffett_pilgrims_notes)

In many quotes He tells us how we are to behave to the poor, sick and downtrodden, and in this quote, He tells us we aren't a "true Baha'í" if we neglect it:

Enrich the poor, raise the fallen, comfort the sorrowful, bring healing to the sick, reassure the fearful, rescue the oppressed, bring hope to the hopeless, shelter the destitute! This is the work of a true Bahá'í, and this is what is expected of him. If we strive to do all this, then are we true Bahá'ís, but if we neglect it, we are not followers of the Light, and we have no right to the name. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks, p. 81)

Some questions to ask ourselves:

How many of us serve these groups?

How many of us can count people such as these as our friends?

How many of us can truly claim we have a right to the name Baha'í?

Because 'Abdu'l-Bahá loved these groups of people so much, there is much that has been written about them, let us now look at what we can learn about how He treated them, to help us claim our name, to help us too draw closer to the poor and help them in practical ways, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá did.

How 'Abdu'l-Bahá Welcomed the Poor and Cheered their Hearts

He made people feel completely at ease:

In London it was noted that inquirers often hated to leave. If any were still present when luncheon or dinner was to be served, they were inevitably invited to dine also. To smother embarrassment, 'Abdu'l-Bahá would extend His hand to the humblest and lead him personally into the dining-room, seating him at His right and talking with such warmth that soon the surprised guest felt completely at ease. (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982 edition, p. 46, #16)

He spoke words of comfort, strength and healing:

One day, in London, while several people were talking to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, a man's voice was heard at the door. It was the son of a country clergyman, but now he

looked more like an ordinary tramp and his only home was along the banks of the river Thames. He had walked thirty miles to see 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The man was taken to the dining room, he was given food, and after he had rested for a while, he said, 'Last evening I had decided to put an end to my futile, hateful life, useless to God and man! In a little country town yesterday, whilst taking what I had intended should be my last walk, I saw a face in the window of a newspaper shop. I stood looking at the face as if rooted to the spot. He seemed to speak to me, and call me to Him!...I read that He is here, in this house. I said to myself, "If there is on earth that personage, I shall take up again the burden of my life."...Tell me, is He here? Will He see me? Even me? The lady replied, 'Of course He will see you...'

Just then 'Abdu'l-Bahá Himself opened the door, extending His hands as though to a dear friend whom He was expecting. "Welcome! Most welcome! I am very much pleased that thou hast come. Be seated." Trembling the poor man sank into a chair by the Master. "Be happy! Be happy!...Do not be filled with grief..." encouraged the Master. "Though thou be poor, thou mayest be rich in the Kingdom of God."

'Abdu'l-Bahá spoke these and other words of comfort, strength and healing. The man's cloud of misery seemed to melt away in the warmth of the Master's loving presence. Before the man left, he said that he was going to work in the fields, and that after he had saved a little money, he was going to buy some land to grow violets for the market. (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982 edition, pp. 78-79, #59)

When anyone was overlooked, it made Him unspeakably sad:

He had left orders that none were to be turned away, but one who had twice vainly sought his presence, and was, through some oversight, prevented from seeing him, wrote a heartbreaking letter showing that he thought himself rebuffed. It was translated by the Persian interpreter. 'Abdu'l-Bahá at once put on his coat, and, turning towards the door, said, with an expression of unspeakable sadness, "A friend of mine has been martyred, and I am very grieved. I go out alone." and he swept down the steps. One could then see how well the title of "Master" became him. ('Abdu'l-Bahá in London, p. 111)

Whenever he felt a heart had been hurt, He would hasten to bring them to Him:

The demands on 'Abdul-Bahá's time were constant. The English Bahá'ís tried to organize the flow of those seeking interviews and instituted a system of official appointments. One day, a woman appeared at the door and asked if she could see 'Abdul-Bahá. When asked if she had an appointment, she admitted that she had not and was promptly told, "I am sorry but He is occupied now with most important people, and cannot be disturbed." Sadly, the woman slowly turned away, but before she could reach the bottom of the steps, a messenger from 'Abdul-Bahá rushed out and breathlessly said, "He wishes to see you, come back!" From the house came the powerful voice of the Master: "A heart has been hurt, hasten, hasten, bring her to Me." (Earl Redman, 'Abdul-Bahá in Their Midst, p.36)

He waited for people who were coming to see Him, even if it inconvenienced others:

When 'Abdu'l-Bahá was in San Francisco, His hostess arranged an interview with the Mayor of Berkeley. Many dignitaries and university people were to gather at a reception.

As the appointed hour for departure approached the hostess went upstairs to warn 'Abdu'l-Bahá that the time was near. He smiled and waved her away, saying, "Very soon! Very soon!"

She left him with some impatience, for there was no evidence of preparation for the trip. After some time she went up again, for the automobile was honking at the door, and it looked as if the Mayor of Berkeley would be kept waiting. But she met only a smile, and "Very soon! Very soon!" from the important guest. At last her patience was quite exhausted for she knew that they could not possibly arrive at the reception in time. Suddenly there was a ring at the door bell. Immediately 'Abdu'l-Bahá's step was on the stair, and when the door opened he was beside the maid, pulling over the threshold a dusty and dishevelled man whom no one had ever heard of, but whom 'Abdu'l-Bahá embraced like a long lost friend.' He had read of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the newspapers and felt he must see Him, but as he did not have enough money for the car fare, he walked the fifteen miles into San Francisco. Had 'Abdu'l-Bahá left on time, they would have missed each other -- but the Master had 'felt his approach' and would not leave until His guest was seated at the table with tea and sandwiches. Only then could the Master say, 'Now I must go, but when you have finished, wait for Me in My room upstairs, until I return, and then we will have a great talk.' (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982 edition, pp. 45-46, #15)

He made people feel happy even if it made others unhappy:

Two ladies from Scotland, delighted that their request to have an evening with the Master while He was in London had been granted, were warmly received by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. How they relished having this intimate evening! Half an hour passed in His warm presence, when suddenly they were filled with consternation -- an aggressive reporter strode into their midst and seated himself -- he wanted information about the Master. His talkative, impolite manner left the ladies speechless -- such an intrusion could spoil that precious evening.

Then, to their surprise, 'Abdu'l-Bahá stood up and, beckoning the reporter to follow Him, led the way into His room. The ladies had indeed got rid of the intruder, but they had also lost 'Abdu'l-Bahá. What were they to do?

Before long the hostess went into the Master's secretary and asked that He be informed 'that the ladies with whom the appointment had been made are awaiting His pleasure.'

Very soon kind words of farewell were heard. Then the Master returned, pausing by the door. Gravely, He looked at each and said, 'You were making that poor man uncomfortable, so strongly desiring his absence; I took him away to

make him feel happy.' (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of `Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982 edition, pp. 43-44, #13)

He gave them hope for the future:

The other meeting was held at the Bowery Mission Hall to help and assist the poor and destitute. First `Abdu'l-Bahá spoke on the subject of the station of poverty and gave the men hope for the future. (Mahmud's Diary, April 18, 1912, p.47)

He made them smile and laugh:

Very early one morning when the main street of Dublin was almost devoid of people, one of the guests at the hotel glanced out her window and saw Abdul-Bahá walking and dictating to His secretary. As they walked, an old man dressed in ragged and very dirty clothes passed by. Abdul-Bahá sent his secretary to fetch the poor fellow. Abdul-Bahá appeared to try to cheer up the man and was finally able to coax a wan smile. (Earl Redman, Abdul-Bahá in Their Midst, p. 164)

He saw the face of God in everyone He met, and everyone came away happy:

Once `Abdu'l-Bahá was asked, 'Why do all the guests who visit you come away with shining countenances?'

'He said with his beautiful smile: "I cannot tell you, but in all those upon whom I look, I see only my Father's Face." (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of `Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982 edition, p. 85, #70)

When He was in America, he spoke to the poor in language they could understand. He reminded them that God blessed the poor, not the rich:

You must be thankful to God that you are poor, for Jesus Christ has said, "Blessed are the poor." He never said, "Blessed are the rich." He said, too, that the Kingdom is for the poor and that it is easier for a camel to enter a needle's eye than for a rich man to enter God's Kingdom. Therefore, you must be thankful to God that although in this world you are indigent, yet the treasures of God are within your reach; and although in the material realm you are poor, yet in the Kingdom of God you are precious. (`Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, pp. 32-33)

He reminded them that Jesus preferred to be poor:

Jesus Himself was poor. He did not belong to the rich. He passed His time in the desert, traveling among the poor, and lived upon the herbs of the field. He had no place to lay His head, no home. He was exposed in the open to heat, cold and frost -- to inclement weather of all kinds -- yet He chose this rather than riches. If riches were considered a glory, the Prophet Moses would have chosen them; Jesus would have been a rich man. (`Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 33)

He reminded them that it was the poor who first accepted Jesus, therefore the poor are His disciples:

When Jesus Christ appeared, it was the poor who first accepted Him, not the rich. Therefore, you are the disciples of Jesus Christ; you are His comrades, for He outwardly was poor, not rich. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 33)

He reminded them that the rich can't take their possessions with them when they die; and many of them have regrets and their hope in the mercy of God is less than those who are poor:

Even this earth's happiness does not depend upon wealth. You will find many of the wealthy exposed to dangers and troubled by difficulties, and in their last moments upon the bed of death there remains the regret that they must be separated from that to which their hearts are so attached. They come into this world naked, and they must go from it naked. All they possess they must leave behind and pass away solitary, alone. Often at the time of death their souls are filled with remorse; and worst of all, their hope in the mercy of God is less than ours. Praise be to God! Our hope is in the mercy of God, and there is no doubt that the divine compassion is bestowed upon the poor. Jesus Christ said so; Bahá'u'lláh said so. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 33)

He told them that Bahá'u'lláh lived among the poor for 2 years. One of the titles He's most proud of was "The Poor One":

While Bahá'u'lláh was in Baghdad, still in possession of great wealth, He left all He had and went alone from the city, living two years among the poor. They were His comrades. He ate with them, slept with them and gloried in being one of them. He chose for one of His names the title of The Poor One and often in His Writings refers to Himself as Darvish, which in Persian means poor; and of this title He was very proud. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 33)

He reminded them that they are closer to God, because they are dependent on God and not themselves:

The rich are mostly negligent, inattentive, steeped in worldliness, depending upon their means, whereas the poor are dependent upon God, and their reliance is upon Him, not upon themselves. Therefore, the poor are nearer the threshold of God and His throne. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 33)

He reminded them of all they had, which made them the richest men on earth:

Jesus was a poor man. One night when He was out in the fields, the rain began to fall. He had no place to go for shelter so He lifted His eyes toward heaven, saying,

"O Father! For the birds of the air Thou hast created nests, for the sheep a fold, for the animals dens, for the fish places of refuge, but for Me Thou hast provided no shelter. There is no place where I may lay My head. My bed consists of the cold ground; My lamps at night are the stars, and My food is the grass of the field. Yet who upon earth is richer than I? For the greatest blessing Thou hast not given to the rich and mighty but unto Me, for Thou hast given Me the poor. To me Thou hast granted this blessing. They are Mine. Therefore am I the richest man on earth. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, pp. 33-34)

He reminded them that they resemble Jesus more than the rich do:

So, my comrades, you are following in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. Your lives are similar to His life; your attitude is like unto His; you resemble Him more than the rich do. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 34)

Home Visits

'Abdu'l-Bahá would visit people in their homes every day, or send a trusty messenger in His place:

...he is each day at their bedside, or sends a trusty messenger. (HM Balyuzi, 'Abdul-Bahá: the Centre of the Covenant, p. 100)

He would encourage others to visit:

In the morning friends and seekers surrounded 'Abdu'l-Bahá like moths. He spoke to them in these words:

You must have deep love for one another. Go to see each other and be consoling friends to all. If a friend lives a little distance from the town, go to see him. Do not content yourselves with words only but act according to the commandments of God. Hold weekly meetings and give feasts. Put forth your efforts to acquire spiritual perfections and to spread the knowledge of God. These are the attributes of the Bahá'ís. Otherwise, what use is there in being a Bahá'í in word alone. (Mahmud's Diary, Sept. 20, 1912, p. 276)

On feast days He would visit the poor in their homes, staying long enough to do whatever He could to make them happy:

On feast days he visits the poor at their homes. He chats with them, inquires into their health and comfort, mentions by name those who are absent, and leaves gifts for all. (HM Balyuzi, 'Abdul-Bahá: the Centre of the Covenant, p. 100)

He would offer practical help:

If he finds a leaking roof or a broken window menacing health, he summons a workman, and waits himself to see the breach repaired. (HM Balyuzi, 'Abdul-Bahá: the Centre of the Covenant, p. 100)

If anyone is in trouble, -- if a son or a brother is thrown into prison, or he is threatened at law, or falls into any difficulty too heavy for him, -- it is to the Master that he straightway makes appeal for counsel or for aid. (HM Balyuzi, 'Abdul-Bahá: the Centre of the Covenant, p. 100)

...one day, a man came running;

"Oh Master!" he said, "Poor Na'um has the measles, and everybody is keeping away from her. What can be done about her?"

'Abdu'l-Bahá immediately engaged a woman to care of her; took a room, put comfortable bedding (His own) in it, called the doctor, sent food and everything she needed. He went to see that she had every attention. And when she died in peace and comfort, He arranged a simple funeral and paid all the expenses Himself."
(Lady Blomfield, The Chosen Highway, p. 101)