

'Abdu'l-Bahá's Simple Life

By Susan Gammage ¹

In this frenzied world, I often wonder how 'Abdu'l-Bahá would have lived his life if He were alive now! It got me thinking about whether there might be some ideas based on how He lived a simple life back then.

Here is the standard He strove for - simplicity and love

The husband of Amelia Collins, a devoted American Bahá'í, was a very sociable man. He would take part in any discussion with perfect freedom and ease. But once, before entering the Master's home, he was so excited that he arranged his tie just right, smoothed his clothes and repeatedly asked his wife what he should do when they arrived there. She told him, 'Nothing! In the family of 'Abdu'l-Bahá simplicity reigns, and nothing but love is ever accepted.' (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982 edition, p. 24, #32)

I love this sweet story where Bahá'u'lláh teaches us how little we need:

Mary Bolles (Maxwell) took an early pilgrimage to the prison city. She heard that the food man eats is of no importance, as its effect endures but a short time. But the food of the spirit is life to the soul and its effects endure eternally. She heard 'Abdu'l-Bahá tell the touching 'story of the hermit'. Baha'u'llah 'was traveling from one place to another with His followers' and 'He passed through a lonely country where, at some little distance from the highway, a hermit lived alone in a cave. He was a holy man, and having heard that Our Lord, Baha'u'llah, would pass that way, he watched eagerly for His approach. When the Manifestation arrived at that spot the hermit knelt down and kissed the dust before His feet and said to Him: "Oh, my Lord, I am a poor man living alone in a cave nearby; but henceforth I shall account myself the happiest of mortals if Thou wilt but come for a moment to my cave and bless it by Thy Presence." Then Baha'u'llah told the man that He would come, not for a moment but for three days, and He bade His followers cast their tents, and await His return. The poor man was so overcome with joy and with gratitude that he was speechless, and led the way in humble silence to his lowly dwelling in a rock. There the Glorious One sat with him, talking to him and teaching him, and toward evening the man bethought himself that he had nothing to offer his great Guest but some dry meat and some dark bread, and water from a spring nearby. Not knowing what to do he threw himself at the feet of his Lord and confessed his dilemma. Baha'u'llah comforted him and by a word bade him fetch the meat and bread and water; then the Lord of the universe partook of this frugal repast with joy and fragrance as though it had been a banquet, and during the three days of His visit they ate only of this food which seemed to the poor hermit the most

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

delicious he had ever eaten. Baha'u'llah declared that He had never been more nobly entertained nor received greater hospitality and love. "This," explained the Master, when He had finished the story, shows us how little man requires when he is nourished by the sweetness of all foods – the love of God.'" (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982 edition, pp. 23-24, #30)

Even His wedding was simple:

Before His wedding day, 'Abdu'l-Bahá made the necessary arrangements for the few guests. His mother and sister made a delicate bridal dress of white batiste. A white head-dress adorned Munírih Khánum hair, worn, as usual, in two braids. At nine in the evening she went with the Greatest Holy Leaf into the presence of Baha'u'llah, Who gave her His blessing. She then went to the bridal room and awaited the coming of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. The service was very simple. At about ten o'clock 'Abdu'l-Bahá came, accompanied by the guests, and Munirih Khanum chanted a tablet revealed by Bahá'u'lláh. 'Later, the wife of 'Abbud recalled the sweetness of that chanting still ringing in her ears.' There were no choir, decorations or cake – just cups of tea. Above all, a glory and a love there were more than sufficient to bless the happy event. (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 1991 revised edition, p.38, #34)

Here's a story He told about the benefits of a simple life:

'Abdu'l-Bahá told a story about a Persian believer's journeys and how he could not sleep at night while in the wilderness for fear of someone stealing his new shirt, a new gift from a prominent person. After several sleepless nights he decided to get rid of the shirt so he could relax. (Rafati, Vahid, Sources of Persian Poetry in the Bahá'í Writings, Vol. III, p. 80)

He had His meals as follows:

7 A.M. Tea and bread

1:30 P.M. Dines with the family

4 P.M. Tea

7:30 P.M. Sits with the family at dinner but partakes of no food Himself

10: P.M. Simple meal ('Abdu'l-Bahá in America: Agnes Parson's Diary, ©1996, Kalimát Press, p. 13)

He ate a very simple diet:

The Master ... ate little food. He was known to begin His day with tea, goat's milk cheese and wheat bread. And at the evening meal a cup of milk and a piece of bread might suffice. He considered the latter a healthy meal. Had not Bahá'u'lláh, while at Sulaymáníyyih, subsisted mostly on milk? (Sometimes Bahá'u'lláh ate rice and milk cooked together.) 'Abdu'l-Bahá's sparse diet also included herbs and

olives – it rarely included meat. (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982 edition, p. 21, #26)

He preferred to share His food with the poor:

On the occasion of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's first dinner in the home of Lady Bloomfield in London His hostess had prepared course after course in her eagerness to please Him. Afterwards He gently commented: 'The food was delicious and the fruit and flowers were lovely, but would that we could share some of the courses with those poor and hungry people who have not even one.' Thereafter the dinners were greatly simplified. Flowers and fruit remained in abundance, for those were often brought to the Master as small love tokens. (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982 edition, p. 22, #28)

Mary Lucas, a pilgrim to Akká in 1905, found that the Master usually ate but one simple meal a day. In eight days He was present at most meals, often coming just to add joy to the occasion, though He was not hungry. If He knew of someone who had had no meal during a day, the family supper was gladly packed up and sent to the needy. (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá)

He served His guests:

Julia Gundy, an early pilgrim, described a beautiful supper at which many friends were welcomed by the Master Himself in Akká. He passed out napkins, embraced and found plates for each. All were individually anointed with attar of rose. He served pilau, a Persian rice dish, to each guest. There were also oranges and rice pudding. 'Throughout the supper, which was very simple in its character and appointment, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was the Servant of the believers. This was indeed a spiritual feast where Love reigned. The whole atmosphere was Love, Joy, and Peace. (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982 edition, p.22, #29)

His schedule looked like this:

Tudor-Pole described a typical day for Abdul-Bahá:
He rises about 5 AM, and works for some hours at his correspondence. Interviews commence soon after 9 AM and last until midday. After lunch he takes a short rest and then usually rides out into the parks or to visit various people who were deeply interested in his work. Gatherings of the friends take place nearly every evening and he has given some wonderful discourses at such times... He is quite vigorous and looks both well and cheerful. (Earl Redman, Abdul-Bahá in Their Midst, p. 30)

His clothing:

The Master kept little clothing – one coat at a time was ample. (Annamarie Honnold, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 1982 edition, p. 21, #26)

'Abdu'l-Bahá's family was taught to dress in such a way that they would be 'an example to the rich and an encouragement to the poor.' Available money was stretched to cover far more than the Master's family needs. One of His daughters wore no bridal gown when she married – a clean dress sufficed. The Master was queried why He had not provided bridal clothes. With candour He replied simply, 'My daughter is warmly clad and has all that she needs for her comfort. The poor have not. What my daughter does not need I will give to the poor rather than to her.' (Annamarie Honnold, *Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá*)

A friend had sent some fur so that the Master could have a good warm coat; He had it cut up and made into twenty caps for the elderly men of the town. (Garis, Martha Root, p. 214)

As someone who suffers from Seasonal Affective Disorder, and needs a LOT of light, I take great comfort in this story:

As we drove up Broadway, glittering with its electric signs, He spoke of them smiling, apparently much amused. Then He told us that Bahá'u'lláh had loved light. "He could never get enough light. He taught us," the Master said, "to economize in everything else but to use light freely." (The Diary of Juliet Thompson, pp. 261-262)

Even when Bahá'u'lláh was in great need, he didn't accept financial help from the friends:

For his own personal use Bahá'u'lláh never ordered anything extravagant. The life of luxury to which He was accustomed in His youth had been denied Him since His imprisonment in the Síyáh-Chál of Tihrán when all His possessions had been confiscated. But He lived a life of austerity in a majesty such that in the words of Edward (Granville Browne of Cambridge University, He was 'the object of a devotion that kings might envy and emperors sigh for in vain'. His personal needs were simple and inexpensive.

...

He Himself and the members of His family, however, lived an austere life. There were many occasions when He was in great need, but did not accept financial help from the friends. (Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh* v 4, p. 248)

Here's an example:

...the gates of the prison of Akká were opened. Bahá'u'lláh, His family and companions left the barracks after being confined there for a period of two years, two months and five days. Bahá'u'lláh and His family were confined in a house. (Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 3, p. 221)

Most of His companions were consigned to a caravanserai, an unfit dwelling-place, in which. 'Abdu'l-Bahá occupied one room himself. The rooms were damp and filthy.

'Abdu'l-Bahá sold a certain gift which had been given to Him in Baghdad and with the proceeds began to repair the rooms for the companions of Bahá'u'lláh. He left the repair of His own room to the last. The money ran out and as a result His room remained unrepaired and in very bad condition. Not only were its walls damp but the roof leaked and the floor was covered with dust. He sat and slept on a mat in that room. His bed cover was a sheepskin. The room was infested with fleas and when He slept under the sheepskin, fleas gathered and began biting. 'Abdu'l-Bahá worked out a tactic of defeating the fleas by turning over His sheepskin at intervals. He would sleep for a while before the fleas found their way again to the inner side. He would then turn the sheepskin over again. Every night He had to resort to this tactic eight to ten times. (Taherzadeh, The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh, vol. 3, p. 222)

He didn't allow his family to have any luxuries either:

He does not permit his family to have luxuries. He himself eats but once a day, and then bread, olives, and cheese suffice him.

His room is small and bare, with only a matting on the stone floor. His habit is to sleep upon this floor. Not long ago a friend, thinking that this must be hard for a man of advancing years, presented him with a bed fitted with springs and mattress. So these stand in his room also, but are rarely used. "For how," he says, "can I bear to sleep in luxury when so many of the poor have not even shelter?" So he lies upon the floor and covers himself only with his cloak. (Myron Henry Phelps and Bahíyyih *Khán*um, Life and Teachings of Abbas Effendi, pp. 7-8. https://bahai-library.com/khanum_phelps_abbas_effendi)