Learning from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in a Society Characterized by Ageism

DEBORAH K. VAN DEN HOONAARD

Abstract
Bahá’ís the world over view ‘Abdu’l-Bahá not only as the Centre of Bahá’u’lláh’s Covenant but as the Exemplar of how we should live. However, although the images and stories of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that come to mind for many of us are from the period of His life after His release from prison at the age of sixty-five, we don’t often think about Him as an old man. This article summarizes the nature and impact of ageism and how we learn to be old by the way people treat us. It explores how ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s example informs our own lives given the prevalence of ageism in Western society.[1]

Résumé
Les bahá’ís du monde entier considèrent ‘Abdu’l-Bahá non seulement comme le Centre de l’Alliance de Bahá’u’lláh, mais aussi comme l’exemple de la façon dont nous devrions vivre. Cependant, bien que les images et les récits de la vie de ‘Abdu’l-Bahá qui viennent à l’esprit de beaucoup d’entre nous soient celles de la période de sa vie qui a suivi sa libération de prison à l’âge de soixante-cinq ans, nous ne pensons pas souvent à lui comme étant un vieil homme. Dans cet article, l’auteure résume la nature et l’impact de l’âgisme et comment nous apprenons à vivre la vieillesse par la façon dont les gens nous traitent. Elle explore comment l’exemple de ‘Abdu’l-Bahá peut nous inspirer dans notre propre vie, compte tenu que l’âgisme est un phénomène plutôt répandu dans nos sociétés occidentales.

Resumen
Los bahá’ís en todo el mundo consideran a ‘Abdu’l-Bahá no solamente como el Centro de Alianza de Bahá’u’lláh sino también como el Ejemplo de cómo debemos vivir. Sin embargo, a pesar que las imágenes y las anécdotas de ‘Abdu’l-Bahá que vienen a la mente para muchos de nosotros son del periodo de Su vida después de su liberación de prisión a la edad de sesenta y cinco años, no frecuentemente pensamos acerca de Él como un hombre de edad avanzada. Este artículo resume la naturaleza e impacto de la discriminación por edad y como aprendemos a ser de avanzada edad por la manera que la gente nos trata. Explora cómo el ejemplo de ‘Abdu’l-Bahá informa nuestras propias vidas dada la prevalencia de discriminación por edad en la sociedad Occidental.

I have been a Bahá’í for fifty years, which means I became a Bahá’í in 1971 at the age of twenty. One of the first things I learned as a new Bahá’í was that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is the Son of Bahá’u’lláh, the Centre of the Covenant, and the Exemplar for how to live as a Bahá’í—how to integrate the teachings into our own lives. I acquired a photo of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, a man with

1 This paper is a slightly edited version of a presentation offered at the 2021 Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá’í Studies.

an unforgettable smile, a long white beard and hair, and traditional Persian dress. To me, and I suspect to many young Bahá'ís, He seemed ageless. He simply didn't have an age. He was 'Abdu'l-Bahá, unique in the history of religion.

Over the past fifty years, I have raised a family and become a sociologist who studies issues related to what it means to be old in Western society. My work has focused on transitions associated with aging, such as widowhood and retirement. But, as a Bahá'í, my *raison d'être* in my personal and professional life is always the elimination of prejudice of all kinds. A widespread, yet almost invisible prejudice in Western societies is ageism—a term coined by Robert Butler to refer to prejudice and discrimination against people based on their age (Butler).

The elimination of prejudice of all kinds is a core teaching of the Bahá'í Faith; in the pursuit of this goal, Bahá'ís must recognize ageism and work to eliminate it from their communities and from wider society. The goal of this article is to suggest that it is past time for the Bahá'í community to recognize the ubiquity of ageism, and to reflect on what we can learn from 'Abdu'l-Bahá about being old.

Learning to Be Old

This reflection begins with the recognition that much of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's ministry, and certainly His travels, took place when He was an old man. 'Abdu'l-Bahá appeared for the first time before a large audience anywhere on Sunday, September 10, 1911, in the City Temple of Holborn, in London, England: "In his 68th year, in precarious health, He stepped into a crowded, demanding arena to proclaim [his message of unity and the necessity for world peace] . . . He addressed meeting after meeting . . . day after day" (Balyuzi 140).

'Abdu'l-Bahá's tremendous accomplishments in old age provide a striking counternarrative to contemporary Western expectations of the place and the capacities of old people in our communities. I want to suggest that as we look at the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, we can follow His example rather than the path laid out by these societal expectations.

That we need such an example becomes clear once we realize how impactful these societal expectations are. People learn to be old. We often think that learning to be old means learning about health, exercise, or diet. Rather, as I have elsewhere argued in depth, being old has a social meaning, and we learn this meaning by the way others treat us. In my work in this area, I use the concept of the "looking-glass self," which proposes that the way individuals think about who they are is significantly influenced by how they perceive others think about them (Cooley 152). If those we meet see us as competent, we will internalize that belief. If an old person perceives that others see them as incompetent, uninteresting, or unattractive, with little to contribute, they may internalize those beliefs and become prejudiced against themselves (Levy 579).

I began thinking about the social process of learning to be old about fifteen years ago when I heard a presentation called "Learning to be Black." The author, Dr. Efa Etoroma had come to Canada from Africa as a graduate student and thought of himself as African. However, he soon learned that, in the Canadian context, he was not African; he was Black. How did he find out? Through the way people treated him. He learned that when he went to the bank, he had to dress formally to appear trustworthy; he learned that he might be followed in stores. Etoroma described how his white roommate taught him about jazz because, as a Black person, he was supposed to like jazz. The paper, which focused on how we might acquire an unexpected identity, explains the social process through which Etoroma learned what it means to be Black in Canada.

That paper made me think about how we learn to be old through how others react to and treat us. Many people believe that we can and should "stay young" by exercising, eating right, and not paying attention to what others think. After all, they say, "age is only a number." But, no matter what a person does, people begin to treat them in ways that tell them they are no longer young, that they are getting old. As Margaret Cruikshank explains, "we do not take on the identity of 'old,' it befalls us" (173). In addition, even though women live longer than men, they are considered "old" younger than men. So women begin to learn to be old when they approach 50, and they are supposed to expend a great deal of energy to look as young as possible.

Here are some examples:

It's your birthday, and people say, "How old are you, twenty-nine?" You are in your forties.

When you are with your teenaged daughter, you are introduced to a man who asks, "Oh, are you sisters?"

You are supposed to see these statements as compliments. They are obviously not true.

People are amazed at your age, or that you are a grandmother, or retired. All of these examples include a subtext that says, "You are getting old, and you are supposed to feel complimented by being told that you look or act younger than you are." Aging is a negative process that is to be fought.

The point is that the social meaning of getting old has an undeniable impact on the way we experience aging as individuals and members of our community. We live in a society in which ageism is endemic. We take it so for granted that we do not recognize it in our behavior and discourse. People, therefore, are very reluctant to use the word "old" to describe someone else or themselves. Research shows that people resist the label "old" well into their seventies, eighties, or even nineties to maintain the fiction that you are "only as old as you feel."

Another indicator of our discomfort with the idea of aging is the presence of euphemisms. Individuals, the media, and policy makers use terms like "senior" and "golden age" to avoid the words "old" or "aged." We often use

euphemisms to escape from negative connotations associated with certain words describing a situation or group of people. This is an attempt to eradicate the prejudice these words imply; however, unless the social reality that gives rise to prejudice really changes, in time, the euphemism attracts the negative connotation, and we find ourselves adopting a still newer term. When we finally achieve the elimination of our discomfort around aging, we will no longer need euphemisms to describe it.

Humorous euphemisms can also be used to entrench ageism Consider the term "senior moment." This phrase is often used lightheartedly to defuse embarrassment when someone has a momentary lapse of memory, forgetting someone's name or struggling to produce a word that's just on the tip of their tongue. To get the joke, we must connect being old with memory loss or functional incompetence. Without the stereotype, the phrase would not be funny. These jokes about being old should bring attention to the presence of negative stereotypes regarding aging. These stereotypes might lead us to expect old people to suffer from dementia at worst, or at least diminished cognitive capacity and judgment. They are part of a "decline narrative" that pervades "our sense of growing old" (Gullette, "Against 'Aging'" 262). In North America, we feel more comfortable with jokes about old people than with those targeted at any other group. In fact, ageism is "the most acceptable and unnoticed of the cruel prejudices" (Gullette, *Ending Ageism* xiii).

The assumption that old people will experience an inevitable decline—that they will become increasingly unable to continue with ordinary activities, or that they'll lack the judgement to know when they should give these activities up—is widespread. *The New York Times* columnist Jane E. Brody noted that when she was in her mid-seventies, her sons started urging her to stop driving even though she had been in no accidents, no near-accidents, and had not demonstrated any decrement in her driving ability. For Brody, learning to be old meant having to endure the well-meaning protectiveness of her sons. She wryly commented, "I will stubbornly resist altering my habits to avoid potential tragedies that others foresee."

Not everyone pushes back against the unrelenting tide of others' expectations as successfully as Brody. As people get older, many internalize societal stereotypes and, in a sense, become prejudiced against themselves. As Ashton Applewhite notes, we are so busy "feeling young" that we stay blind to the ageism in and around us (19). Many of us attempt to distance ourselves from thinking of ourselves as old by suggesting that we are not like others our age. Margaret Cruikshank reports that women who view themselves as "not old" work very hard not to appear old, in order to avoid the stigma associated with looking and being old (154). Cruikshank notes that researchers have found that many old people deny that they have been treated

differently because of their age, while agreeing that others have been treated differently. Perhaps this denial is, at least in part, a way of convincing themselves that they look and act younger than they are. Many are pleased if a cashier does not offer them a "seniors' discount."

Age Segregation

Learning to be old is learning to live in a society that devalues old people and believes them to be inferior and uninteresting. The propensity for age segregation exacerbates this situation. Recent decades have seen a tremendous rise in age-segregated housing, ranging from luxurious seniors' complexes and retirement communities to subsidized "seniors' apartments" and nursing homes. This development is "an extreme version of spatial segregation" in which the only old people many young people know are their grandparents, and old people only know and talk to other old people.

Age segregation is both a cause and an effect of ageism. Scholars have long recognized that segregation increases prejudice; conversely, as the World Health Organization, in its 2021 *Global Report on Ageism*, points out, "intergenerational contact strategies are among the most effective interventions for reducing ageism" (127). And yet, as a society, we seem unconcerned with age segregation, a fact that points to the extent to which ageism shapes our collective consciousness. As Becca Levy has noted, one impact of ageism is people's failure to visit older people, thereby reducing the potential for intergenerational contact (578). We seem to take age-segregation for granted, not only in our living arrangements but in our work and socializing. In my experience, this is also often the case in Bahá'í communities in North America where youth and old members of the community do not often work together and might not attend the same events. These communities are simply reproducing the age segregation we all take for granted.

The consequences of age segregation are severe. While some of these may seem at first glance to primarily impact old people—the disastrous results of the COVID-19 pandemic in age-segregated environments such as nursing homes being an example (van den Hoonaard, "Foreword")—age segregation impacts all of us. The whole community loses a tremendous amount when those of different ages do not spend time with one another. In the Bahá'í context, the importance of social contact and bonds to community life is made clear by the importance placed on home visits by the Universal House of Justice. Visiting across generations in particular aligns with the advice of Shoghi Effendi who points out: "The old and the young have each something specific to contribute to the progress and welfare of the Bahá'í community. The energy of youth should be tempered and guided by the wisdom of old age" (qtd. in *Lights of Guidance* no. 2159). When Bahá'í communities mirror the age segregation that is

widespread in North American culture, the sharing that Shoghi Effendi referred to cannot occur. Catherine Bigonnesse and Jean Marc Bigonnesse identify this situation as impeding the accomplishment of universal participation, a fundamental aspect of Bahá'í community life that is also a way to address ageism (69). Margaret Morganroth Gullette insists that "nothing beats social interaction with older strangers, under the right conditions" to help younger people escape the lure of ageism (*Ending Ageism* 59).

'Abdu'l-Bahá's Example

So, what does all this have to do with 'Abdu'l-Bahá?

'Abdu'l-Bahá spent most of his childhood and adult life in exile, culminating in incarceration in the prison-city of 'Akká in what was then Palestine. After spending fifty-six years in prison, He was freed as a result of the Young Turks' Revolution in 1908.

Coincidentally, He was released from prison at the age of sixty-five–the age that we often associate with retirement.

'Abdu'l-Bahá's first act upon His release was to visit the grave of His Father. He resumed carrying water on Fridays and Saturdays to nourish the garden He had planted there. His friends and family worried that this labor of love was too much for 'Abdu'l-Bahá and begged Him to spare Himself the task. 'Abdu'l-Bahá gave in but looked so sad that they regretted their request. The service of tending the garden had brought 'Abdu'l-Bahá joy and peace. After two weeks, He brought His friends and family together and asked their permission to take up the task again. How could they refuse? (Balyuzi 130–31).

'Abdu'l-Bahá was, at this time, in poor health, but He protected others from knowing this. His doctors said that He needed a change of air and that He should leave the Holy Land. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's departure, far from a mere measure to preserve His health, was the first step towards reaching the West to deliver, in person, His message of peace and the oneness of humanity. Shoghi Effendi, in *God Passes By*, writes:

> 'Abdu'l-Bahá was at this time broken in health. He suffered from several maladies brought on by the strains and stresses of a tragic life spent almost wholly in exile and imprisonment. He was on the threshold of three-score years and ten. Yet as soon as He was released from His forty-year long captivity, as soon as He had laid the Báb's body in a safe and permanent resting-place, His mind was free of grievous anxieties connected with the execution of that priceless Trust. He arose with sublime courage, confidence and resolution to consecrate what little strength remained to Him, in the evening of His life, to a service of such heroic proportions that no parallel is to found in the annals of the first Bahá'í century. (279)

Indeed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Himself, on arriving in America in 1912, told those who had come to meet Him:

> I was in Egypt and was not feeling well; but I wished to come to you in America. My friends said, "This is a long journey; the sea is wide; you should remain here." But the more they advised and insisted, the greater became my longing to take this trip, and now I have come to America . . . there were many troubles and vicissitudes but in thought of meeting you, all these things were forgotten. (Balyuzi 173)

It is enlightening to look at how journalists described 'Abdu'l-Bahá when they first saw Him. The *New York World*, for example, noted that He was sixty-five, "but looks ninety . . . [although] His voice is strong" (Ward 16). *Current Literature* said, "Toward the end of April there landed in New York an old man with a white turban and flowing beard, clad in strange garments and speaking a strange tongue" (Ward 80). Porter Sargent, a friend of Stanwood Cobb, an early Bahá'í, described 'Abdu'l-Bahá, as a "dear, kind, tired old man" (Stockman 54). These descriptions provide some insight into how 'Abdu'l-Bahá appeared to those who were, in some ways, immune to recognizing His spiritual station. They also remind us that 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not do anything to make Himself look younger than He was.

As Robert Stockman, in *'Abdu'l-Bahá in America*, notes, He had what Max Weber defined as charismatic authority, "gifts of body and spirit . . . believed to be supernatural and not available to everybody" (qtd. in Stockman 48). *Hearst's Magazine* noted that "'Abdu'l-Bahá is a most remarkable individual. He has magnetism plus. His zeal, enthusiasm, animation, hope and faith run over and inundate everything" (Ward 206).

The accounts of the talks, public events, meetings with individuals, and travels that 'Abdu'l-Bahá undertook during His time in America are astonishing, revealing not only the intensity of His schedule but the loving way He responded to everyone. As Balyuzi comments, "He addressed meeting after meeting. He met day after day . . . a stream of visitors" (142). From early morning until late at night, 'Abdu'l-Bahá made Himself available to whoever wanted to meet with him. Often, He was quite fatigued or ill. One example from the *Diary of Juliet Thompson* may suffice to illustrate the point:

> The Master was really too ill to have gone to this conference. He had been in bed all morning, suffering from complete exhaustion, and had a high temperature. . . . I was with Him all morning. While I was sitting beside Him I asked: "Must you go to the Hotel Astor when you are so ill?" "I work by the confirmations of the Holy Spirit," He answered. "I do not work by hygienic laws. If I did," He laughed, "I would not get

> anything done." After the meeting, [He] shook hands with the whole audience, with every one of those thousands of people! (285)

Balyuzi recounts a particular time when 'Abdu'l-Bahá was "greatly fatigued and disinclined to talk at length. But noting the impressive harmony of the two races in that assemblage, He was particularly moved to speak" (181–82).

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Himself, often commented on His age and physical condition to encourage the Bahá'ís to strive beyond what they might have felt as their own limitations:

> Trust in the favor of God. Look not at your own capacities, for the divine bestowal can transform a drop into an ocean; it can make a tiny seed a lofty tree (*Promulgation* 127)

> Look at me. I am so feeble, yet I have had the strength given to me to come amongst you; a poor servant of God, who has been enabled to give you this message! I shall not be with you long! One must never consider one's own feebleness, it is the strength of the Holy Spirit of Love, which gives the power to teach. The thought of our own weakness could only bring despair. We must look higher than all earthly thoughts, detach ourselves from every material idea, crave for the things of the spirit, fix our eyes on the everlasting bountiful Mercy of the Almighty, who will fill our souls with the gladness of joyful service to His command "Love one Another." (*Paris Talks* 37)

> You have observed that while 'Abdu'l-Bahá was in utmost bodily weakness and feebleness, while He was indisposed, and had not the power to move—notwithstanding this physical state He travelled through many countries. (*Tablets of the Divine Plan* 41)

When He was at Green Acre Bahá'í School, 'Abdu'l-Bahá commented:

> Although the body was weak and not fitted to undergo the vicissitudes of crossing the Atlantic, yet love assisted us and we came here. At certain times, the spirit must assist the body. We cannot accomplish really great things through physical force alone, the spirit must fortify our bodily strength (Balyuzi 245)

It is interesting to note that 'Abdu'l-Bahá took daily walks and, on his return voyage to Liverpool, He purposefully walked to increase His stamina. Hasan Balyuzi tells us:

> To reach the presence of Bahá'u'lláh, He always walked the distance between 'Akká and Bahji. Many years later during His Western visit, while crossing by ship from New York to Liverpool, He paced up and down the deck

> for a long time; when at last He sat down to rest, He told His attendants; "I walked 4600 feet, the length of the road between 'Akká and the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh. I want to practise walking perchance I might be able to go on foot to the Shrine. In latter times, in the Holy Land, I was too weak to go on foot and was deprived of this bounty." This was in His sixty-ninth year. (43)

One can barely scratch the surface of what 'Abdu'l-Bahá accomplished during His travels to the West and thereafter. Books about His life include account after account of thousands upon thousands who came to hear His talks, and of His willingness to greet every last individual personally. These books chronicle His constant giving to the poor and the attention He gave to all from the wealthy to the most marginalized.

John Esslemont, in *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, provides a description of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's daily life in 1919-1920, two years preceding His death:

> [I] had the great privilege of spending two and a half months as a guest of 'Abdu'l-Bahá at Haifa and intimately observing His daily life. At this time, although nearly seventy-six years of age, He was still remarkably vigorous, and accomplished daily an almost incredible amount of work. Although very often weary, He showed wonderful powers of recuperation, and His services were always at the disposal of those who needed them most. His unfailing patience, gentleness, kindness, and tact made His presence like a benediction. It was His custom to spend a large part of each night in prayer and meditation. From early morning until evening, except for a short siesta after lunch, he was busily engaged in reading and answering letters . . . In the afternoon, He usually had a little relaxation in the form of a walk or a drive. (64–65)

'Abdu'l-Bahá provides the example of the potential for people in their old age to contribute to and to be an integral part of society. One might think of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's being freed from prison as a type of retirement just as many people experience retirement as gaining freedom from the constraints of paid work.

When He was first released from prison, people asked 'Abdu'l-Bahá what He would do now that He was free. He answered that He had always been free, that the only prison is the prison of self (Balyuzi, 157). Nonetheless, 'Abdu'l-Bahá faced the well-meaning desires of those who loved Him to protect Him from Himself just as many old people today face pressure from their loved ones to be careful and not do anything that might look risky. Hence, they discouraged Him from tending the garden at the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh and from taking the voyage to America. What a loss if He had complied with their worries!

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