

The Pattern of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Life  
"Be as I am"

A Dramatic Reading by Marlene Macke \*

*[Note: Three or four Readers take turns reading the following script, in the style of friends having a conversation about recognizing and cultivating virtues or spiritual qualities, based on examples from the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.]*

Reader

What is it that makes the Bahá'í Faith unique among religious faiths?

Reader

One aspect is the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Jesus designated Peter as the rock on which He would build His church and Muhammad appointed His son-in-law 'Ali as His successor. So too did Bahá'u'lláh, founder of the Bahá'í Faith, appoint a successor. Both in His Will and in the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas* (or *Book of Laws*), Bahá'u'lláh appointed His Son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Reader

And He also identified 'Abdu'l-Bahá as "the "Perfect Exemplar of His teachings" and the "embodiment of every Bahá'í virtue".

Reader

Let's take a closer look at 'Abdu'l-Bahá as the embodiment of every Bahá'í virtue. A virtue is like a spiritual quality, right?

Reader

That's right. When we practice our virtues, we are living a life that conforms to moral principles and standards. These virtues are inherent in every human being.

Reader

And ultimately each human being has to make choices on whether or not to live a virtuous or spiritual life.

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\* See more about this document at [https://bahai-library.com/macke\\_dramatic\\_readings](https://bahai-library.com/macke_dramatic_readings)

Reader

For me, it starts with the story of the Western pilgrims who visited ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1899. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s farewell as they were leaving included the following words: “... Another commandment I give unto you, that ye love one another even as I love you ... Look at Me and be as I am...”<sup>i</sup>

Reader

Ah, “Be as I am.” Those simple words give us the pattern for how a Bahá’í can live his or her life in a way that is pleasing to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and in conformity with a spiritual life.

Reader

And living the virtues will be one of the ways in which each human being will assist in achieving the goals of Bahá’u’lláh’s divine mission, namely the unification of the entire human race and the establishment of peace on earth!

Reader

But the question is, how can you and I possibly “be” as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was?

Reader

One way to start is to be mindful of the virtues, such as generosity, courtesy, kindness, and so on.

Reader

And equally helpful, we can study ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s life. We can identify how He put the virtues into practice in His daily life.

Reader

According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “The virtues of the seed are revealed in the tree; it puts forth branches, leaves, blossoms, and produces fruits. All these virtues were hidden and potential in the seed. Through the blessing and bounty of cultivation these virtues became apparent.”<sup>ii</sup>

Reader

Ah, yes. With examples from His life fresh in mind, we can consciously shed our own less spiritual habits and inclinations, and strive to become more fully spiritual.

### Reader

Did you know that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's virtues were clearly evident even in His childhood? I love the story of Him going out one day on His Father's vast estates north of Tihrán to visit the shepherds. They were looking after thousands of sheep. To honour Him, they organized a feast.

### Reader

I know that story! When it was time to take 'Abdu'l-Bahá home, the head shepherd advised Him that it was customary for the guest to leave a gift for the shepherds. 'Abdu'l-Bahá said He had nothing with him to give. The head shepherd insisted. 'Abdu'l-Bahá pondered the situation and decided to give each of the shepherds with a few sheep from His Father's flocks. Later when told of His Son's generosity, Baha'u'lláh laughed in delight.<sup>iii</sup>

### Reader

Imagine how happy the shepherds must have been!

### Reader

The suffering 'Abdu'l-Bahá withstood as a very young child attest to His virtue of courage. Remember when His Father was imprisoned in that ghastly prison in Tihrán? That little boy braved the taunts and stones pelted at Him by other children whenever He ventured forth to an aunt's house to get a few coins so His beloved mother could feed Him and His two younger siblings.

### Reader

And despite the city's strict nighttime curfew and the savage dogs that roamed the streets at night, He often went with His mother in order to take a scant portion of food to Bahá'u'lláh. With every step, they feared the news that He might not even be alive.

### Reader

'Abdu'l-Bahá contracted tuberculosis about that time too. And, then, in the hideous conditions of their winter exile over the mountains to Baghdád, the poor child sustained such severe frostbite to His hands and feet, it plagued Him for the rest of His life.<sup>iv</sup>

### Reader

In one of those divine mysteries, however, doctors in Baghdád later declared Him free of the normally incurable tuberculosis!<sup>v</sup>

### Reader

Imagine the remarkable degree of detachment 'Abdu'l-Bahá demonstrated, all within the first ten years of His life. He went from living in palaces with the utmost wealth and splendour to homelessness, life-threatening illnesses and nearly unendurable hardship.

### Reader

Trials and tribulations continued to harass the Holy Family. Bahá'u'lláh's brother Mírzá Yahyá caused endless strife among the small band of loyal Bábís, and other equally envious and hateful half-brothers stirred up intrigues intended to discredit Bahá'u'lláh to the authorities.

### Reader

The atmosphere in Baghdád became so poisonous that Bahá'u'lláh chose to exile Himself to the wilderness. He hoped His absence would ameliorate the bitter conflicts among the family members, but imagine the sorrow of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His mother and younger sister and brother, now bereft of their Loved One.

### Reader

Another virtue of 'Abdu'l-Bahá came to the fore in those years. Still a young teenager, He began to assume responsibility for His family. He later told famed Bahá'í historian Nabíl that He felt He had grown old while still a child.<sup>vi</sup>

### Reader

And that was just the beginning. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's life of service increased after Bahá'u'lláh's return from His year and a half of self-imposed exile in the mountains north of Baghdád. Large numbers of Bábís and admirers flocked to meet Bahá'u'lláh. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, who was also named the Master by His Father, acted as Bahá'u'lláh's deputy and shield, in particular, turning away the merely curious or those who were not well-wishers or truth-seekers.

### Reader

'Abdu'l-Bahá's virtue of leadership was firmly established in those years. He assumed complete responsibility for supervising the functioning of the large household, seeing to proper provisioning and smoothing the affairs of the family. He was barely sixteen years old at the time!

Reader

And don't forget a new service He began to perform for Bahá'u'lláh, that of transcribing His Father's tablets and writings. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's joyfulness fully shone when He was able to lighten any load from His Father's shoulders.

Reader

And these services for His Father only intensified as the years passed. When the Holy Family was uprooted again with exile to Constantinople, for example, 'Abdu'l-Bahá's work expanded to guarding His Father night and day, ensuring that provisions were found for the tired travellers, including hay and water for the 36 pack animals, encouraging the weak and weary exiles and cheering the faint-hearted.

Reader

What steadfastness the Master demonstrated!

Reader

What perseverance!

Reader

What loving-kindness!

Reader

I think also of the last exile of the Holy Family in 1868 which took them to the pestilent prison city of 'Akká. They arrived, many close to death. They had no nourishing food and only water was fouled. The conditions were unspeakably unhygienic to say the least. They suffered malaria and dysentery. 'Abdu'l-Bahá nursed the sick, shielded His Father, faced down the taunts of 'Akká's citizens, and stood up to the brutal guards and hostile officials.<sup>vii</sup>

Reader

In those horrendous conditions, 'Abdu'l-Bahá had a gift for lifting the hearts and lightening the spirits of the friends. Every night, He would gather everyone together. No matter how grievous their day, He encouraged each to recount whatever bizarre or humorous event they had encountered, and all would laugh and laugh.<sup>viii</sup>

### Reader

That reminds me of an account by May Maxwell who recalled mealtimes with 'Abdu'l-Bahá. "... I have never seen," May wrote, "such happiness nor heard such laughter as at 'Akká. The Master seems to sound all the chords of our human nature and set them vibrating to heavenly music."<sup>ix</sup>

### Reader

And how about the story of the wealthy American socialite, Mrs. Agnes Parsons, who invited twenty of America's elite to a private dinner with 'Abdu'l-Bahá. She wanted them to learn of His Father's Cause, and no doubt the worthy gentlemen resigned themselves to suffering through a boring lecture in deference to their friend, Mrs. Parsons.

### Reader

Oh yes! 'Abdu'l-Bahá told a story that made the dignitaries laugh. "He Himself laughed heartily, and again with them when they, encouraged by the lead He had given them, also told amusing stories. 'Abdu'l-Bahá and his guests were full of mirth throughout that luncheon. It was 'good to laugh', He told them; 'laughter is spiritual relaxation."<sup>x</sup>

### Reader

The generosity and kindness of the Master were legendary. In 'Akká when some of the restrictions against the prisoners were relaxed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá ministered to the sick and needy, giving them small amounts of the money at His disposal. These modest acts did much to soften the hard hearts of the citizens and authorities. After the years of abuse they had heaped upon the Holy Family, people began to recognize the spirit of the Bahá'í teachings.

### Reader

And these sick and poor people were assured of the Master's attention whenever they needed it. Why He even hired a medical doctor, Nicolaki Bey, to care for them. 'Abdu'l-Bahá asked only that the doctor refrain from telling people who was paying his salary.<sup>xi</sup>

### Reader

One day He needed to travel from 'Akká to Haifa and asked for a seat in the stage coach. The driver, surprised, said "Your Excellency surely wishes a private carriage." "No," replied the Master. While He was still in the coach in Haifa, a distressed fisherwoman came to Him; all day she had caught nothing and now must return to her hungry family. The Master gave her five francs, then turned to the driver and said: "You now see the reason why I would not take a private carriage. Why should I ride in luxury when so many are starving?"

### Reader

How about the story about the Master and His coats? Apparently He chose for Himself the cheapest cotton clothing but friends in Persia would send Him costly garments. Out of respect to the giver, 'Abdu'l-Bahá would wear the gift once, then give it away.

### Reader

The story continues. 'Abdu'l-Bahá's wife, Munírih Khánum, was going on a journey. "Fearing that her husband would give away his cloak and so be left without one for himself, she left a second cloak with her daughter, charging her not to inform her father of it. Not long after her departure, the Master, suspecting, it would seem, what had been done, said to his daughter, 'Have I another cloak?' The daughter could not deny it, but told her father of her mother's charge. The Master replied, 'How could I be happy having two cloaks, knowing that there are those that have none?' Nor would he be content until he had given the second cloak away."<sup>xii</sup>

### Reader

In 1892, with the death of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was named His Father's successor and assumed formal leadership of the Bahá'í Faith. Those followers who were faithful to Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant rejoiced in the news and turned eagerly to 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Others, including many of His own family, arose with fresh fury to oppose His every move.

### Reader

Whole books could be written to describe their evil actions towards 'Abdu'l-Bahá, but He responded to every new treachery and every set-back by engaging His sin-covering eye.

### Reader

He also continued to cheer the spirits of the faithful followers, strengthen their faith and instil in them the vision of the greatness and the potency of the Cause.<sup>xiii</sup>

### Reader

The Master's certitude, faithfulness, forgiveness and steadfastness in the face of such opposition gives us much to ponder.

### Reader

Yes, such hindrances and set-backs we suffer today are inconsequential pinpricks in comparison.

Reader

We have much to be grateful for by studying His example.

Reader

And how He must have gloried when at last He attained the freedom to travel and teach His Father's Cause to the peoples of the West.

Reader

We are especially fortunate to have so many stories that illustrate 'Abdu'l-Bahá's virtues while He was in the West. All of us must have a few favourites.

Reader

I find the story of 'Abdu'l-Bahá teaching the virtue of moderation and simplicity in our meals quite illuminating. In London lavish dishes and numerous courses were served by the upper classes. 'Abdu'l-Bahá commented after His first such dinner at the home of Lady Blomfield, "The food was delicious and the fruit and flowers were lovely, but would that we could share some of these courses with those poor and hungry people who have not even one."

Reader

Lady Blomfield agreed instantly and decided, "one substantial, plentiful dish, with salad, cheese, biscuits, sweetmeats, fruits, and flowers on the table, preceded by soup and followed by coffee or tea, should be quite sufficient for any dinner."<sup>xiv</sup>

Reader

I imagine 'Abdu'l-Bahá respected her for heading in this more modest direction, although I'm sure He silently reflected on the many times when the Holy Family had no food to eat, or when a thin broth and a handful of rice seemed a banquet.

Reader

Kindliness was another virtue 'Abdu'l-Bahá lived. He said, "Let not conventionality cause you to seem cold and unsympathetic when you meet strange people from other countries... Be kind to strangers... Help to make them feel at home... ask if you may render them any service... What profit is there in agreeing that universal friendship is good, and talking of the solidarity of the human race as a grand ideal? Unless these thoughts are translated into the world of action, they are useless."<sup>xv</sup>

### Reader

That account speaks to our opportunity today with the arrival of the Syrians and other refugees who seek safety from the bloodshed in their homelands. We can be kind to them, help them to feel at home and offer our assistance.

### Reader

It also illuminates the principle of “deeds not words”. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said, “Unless these thoughts are translated into the world of action, they are useless.”

### Reader

Let us not overlook the true love ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had for persons who most other people would ignore or avoid. I love the story of the day He was in the gardens of a summer resort in New Hampshire. He spotted a tramp on the street and approached him. “He took the old man’s dirt-crust-ed hands in His, and spoke to him with love and affection. It was as if He had known this weary, dejected tramp all His life. And then He saw how filthy and torn the old man’s trousers were. At that hour of that day no one was about. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá walked towards the porch of the Inn, wrapped His long-flowing cloak around Himself, took off His own trousers, gave them to the old tramp, and told him: “May God go with you.”<sup>xvi</sup>

### Reader

One of my favourite stories is the story of Fred Mortensen whose teenage years had been dedicated to vandalism and petty theft. Then the police managed to nab him and, Albert Hall, his Bahá’í lawyer, taught him the Faith. Mr. Mortensen longed to meet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá but had no money to pay for a train ticket from Cleveland. So, he resorted to travelling as a hobo, clinging to the undercarriages or tops of trains. You can just imagine how grimy and stinky Mr. Mortensen must have appeared when he arrived at Green Acre.

### Reader

‘Abdu’l-Bahá asked him to explain how he got there. With embarrassment at his sorry state of attire, he told his story. Mr. Mortensen later wrote, “Now as I looked into the eyes of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá I saw they had changed and a wondrous light seemed to pour out. It was the light of love and I felt relieved and very much happier... he kissed both my cheeks, gave me much fruit, and kissed the dirty hat I wore...”<sup>xvii</sup>

### Reader

And then 'Abdu'l-Bahá installed Fred Mortensen into the automobile He had been using and had Fred travel with Him for a week. "The words of Bahá'u'lláh are my food, my drink and my life," Mr. Mortensen later wrote, "I have no other aim than to be of service in his pathway and to be obedient to his Covenant..."<sup>xviii</sup>

### Reader

'Abdu'l-Bahá also made it a point to pay notable respect towards people of African heritage. Mrs. Pheobe Hearst was a wealthy philanthropist in America. Her butler, Mr. Robert Turner, became the first Black African American to accept the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh.

### Reader

And Mr. Turner had the bounty of accompanying Mrs. Hearst when she travelled to the Holy Land in 1899. Mrs. Hearst and her wealthy friends could not have missed seeing how 'Abdu'l-Bahá showered Robert Turner with love and gave him special deference.<sup>xix</sup>

### Reader

And the stories associated with Mrs. Agnes Parsons, another wealthy socialite who travelled in the highest circles of politicians and diplomats, continue this theme. When 'Abdu'l-Bahá was staying at her mansion in Washington, D.C., He welcomed the opportunity to address some 1,600 students and faculty at Howard University, the premiere Black university in the United States. Applause repeatedly interrupted His call for the abolition of colour prejudice and for love and harmony among all human creatures.<sup>xx</sup>

### Reader

Don't forget the banquet at the Persian Embassy in Washington. The protocol of who sits where is very strict at such diplomatic affairs. Imagine the shock waves throughout the elite gathering that night. 'Abdu'l-Bahá rearranged the place cards so that Louis Gregory, the brilliant Black American lawyer, could sit beside Him at the head table in a place of high honour.<sup>xxi</sup>

### Reader

The Master chose Washington, D.C. for these public demonstrations because the city was still emphatically racially segregated. His actions at the Black university and at the diplomatic function could not go unnoticed. He threw down this gauntlet to illustrate that racial prejudice has no place in this New Age.

Reader

Can we do no less today when we see examples of racial or religious prejudice? We simply must dismantle these barriers to God's plan by speaking out. To follow 'Abdu'l-Bahá's example. To become like 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Reader

So what does it look like to embody the virtues? To cultivate the seeds? How do we practice our virtues?

Reader

Let's take generosity. I think it's too late for us to give away our father's sheep as 'Abdu'l-Bahá did, but we can be generous with our time and talents and give from our resources to causes that support the less fortunate.

Reader

Yes, we can support the Food Bank and visit shut-ins and volunteer with youth activities.

Reader

I ask myself, do I really need ten pairs of shoes and so many coats?

Reader

And leadership. Most of us were not called upon as teenagers to be the head of our families as 'Abdu'l-Bahá was. But we can step forward when elected to the Spiritual Assembly or to an executive position in a service club or charity and demonstrate commitment and wisdom, responsibility and trustworthiness.

Reader

I want to work on joyfulness. I was so taken by the story of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and the Holy Family in the most dreadful conditions of the 'Akká prison. Every night they found the teeniest shred of humour in their day and shared it, and they laughed and laughed.

Reader

Remember those friends of Mrs. Parsons? The dignitaries and businessmen? No doubt they projected an aura of great solemnity as befitted their weighty positions in society. Imagine the Master telling them it's good to laugh, that laughing is spiritual relaxation!

Reader

And I'm all for relaxation!

Reader

Canada's beloved Hand of the Cause John Robarts must have been really relaxed. At one meeting I remember him laughing so hard he could barely finish telling his funny story. We were howling in laughter and tears of joy streamed down every person's cheeks. The atmosphere of love and happiness in that room truly lifted us into heaven.

Reader

Let's practice finding and sharing every morsel of joy with all our friends and families and co-workers!

Reader *[Read lines in quote slowly; pause after every phrase]*

We've shared a lot of food for thought today. Let's wrap up with the Master's wonderful words: "You must manifest complete love and affection towards all mankind. Do not exalt yourselves above others but consider all as your equals, recognizing them as the servants of one God."

Reader *[Read lines in quote slowly; pause after every phrase]*

"Know that God is compassionate towards all, therefore love all from the depths of your hearts, prefer all religionists to yourselves, be filled with love for every race and be kind towards the people of all nationalities. Never speak disparagingly of others but praise without distinction..."

Reader *[Read lines in quote slowly; pause after every phrase]*

"Act in such a way that your heart may be free from hatred. Let not your heart be offended with any one. If some one commits an error and wrong towards you, you must instantly forgive him"

Reader *[Read lines in quote slowly; pause after every phrase]*

"Do not complain of others. Refrain from reprimanding them and if you wish to give admonition or advice let it be offered in such a way that it will not burden the heart of the hearer. Turn all your thoughts towards bringing joy to hearts. Beware! Beware! Lest ye offend any heart."

Reader *[Read lines in quote slowly; pause after every phrase]*

Assist the world of humanity as much as possible. Be the source of consolation to every sad one, assist every weak one, be helpful to every indigent one, be the cause of glorification to every lowly one and shelter those who are overshadowed with fear..." <sup>xxii</sup>

Reader [*Read lines in quote slowly; pause after every phrase*]

“In brief, let each of you be as a lamp shining forth with the virtues of the world of humanity. Be trustworthy, sincere, affectionate and replete with chastity. Be illumined, be spiritual, be divine, be glorious, be quickened of God. Be a Bahá’í.”<sup>xxiii</sup>



Endnotes:

- i. Maxwell, *Early Pilgrimage*, pp 41-43
- ii. *Bahá'í World Faith*, p 267
- iii. 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in *Star of the West*, Vol 13, No. 10, p 272
- iv. Phelps, *Master in Akka*, p 17
- v. Perkins, *Servant of Glory*, p 19
- vi. Perkins, p 20
- vii. Balyuzi, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, p 25
- viii. Perkins, p 61
- ix. Maxwell, p 30
- x. Balyuzi, p 61
- xi. Perkins, p 87
- xii. Phelps, p 7
- xiii. Perkins, p 114
- xiv. Blomfield, *The Chosen Highway*, p 156
- xv. Balyuzi, p 160
- xvi. Balyuzi, p 239
- xvii. Balyuzi, p 250
- xviii. Ibid., p 251
- xix. Stockman, *The Bahá'í Faith in America Origins 1892-1900*, Vol 1, p 156
- xx. Stockman, 'Abdu'l-Bahá in America, pp 97-98
- xxi. *239 Days: 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Journey in America*, p 41
- xxii. Ives, *Portals to Freedom*
- xxiii. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p 452