

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

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Bahá’ís the world over see ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as the Centre of the Covenant and as the Exemplar of how we should live. However, we don’t often think about Him, after His release from prison, as an old man. This presentation explores how ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s example informs our own lives given the prevalence of ageism in Western society.

I have been a Bahá’í for 50 years which means I became a Bahá’í in 1971 at the age of 20. One of the first things I learned was that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was 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. Like most Bahá’ís, I immediately acquired a photo of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. There He was, a man with an unforgettable smile, a long white beard and hair, and Persian dress. To me, He was ageless. He simply didn’t have an age. He was ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, unique in the history of religion.

Over the past 50 years, I’ve raised a family and become a sociologist who studies issues related to what it means to be old in Western society. I focussed on transitions associated with for example, aging, 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 including ageism--prejudice and discrimination against people based on their age. In some ways, the Junior Youth Empowerment program that Bahá’í communities all over the world are engaged in addresses the ageist assumption that the early teen years are comprised of rebellion, cynicism, and materialism with almost astounding results as we see what happens when the spiritual potential of junior youth is unleashed.

But as a Bahá’í community, we have barely begun to think about prejudice against old people. The goal of this presentation is to allow us to begin to think about ageism and about what we can learn from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá about being old, to recognize that most of His ministry, and certainly His travels, took place when He was an old man. As Hasan Balyuzi reminds us, On

Sunday, September 10, 1911, in the City Temple of Holborn, in London, England, 'Abdu'l-Bahá appeared for the first time before an audience anywhere. "In his 68<sup>th</sup> 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 . . ."

I'd like to begin by sharing my thoughts about how we learn to be old. I began thinking about the process of learning to be old about 15 years ago when I heard a paper called "Learning to be Black." The author, Efa Etoroma (2010) had come to Canada from Africa as a graduate student and thought of himself as African, but 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 he had to dress formally to go to the bank to appear trustworthy and that he might be followed in stores. I loved his description of how his white roommate taught him about jazz because, as a Black person, Etoroma was supposed to like jazz. This was not an angry paper. It simply explained the social process through which he learned how to be Black in Canada. I was enchanted.

This 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 you do, people begin to treat you in ways that tell you you're no longer young, that you're getting old. 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.

Here are some personal examples:

- It's your birthday, and people say, "How old are you. 29?"
- You're in your 40s. When you are with your teenaged daughter, you are introduced to a man who says, "oh, are you sisters?" You're supposed to see this statement as a compliment. It's obviously not true. This happened to me at a Bahá'í summer school.
- People are amazed at your age or that you're a grandmother.

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 don't recognize it in our behaviour and discourse. Think, for a moment about the reluctance people have to use the word old to describe someone or themselves. Research shows that people resist the label old well into their 70s, 80s, or even 90s 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. We use the terms like senior and golden age to avoid the word old or aged. We use euphemisms to escape from negative connotations associated with a situation or group of people in an attempt to eradicate the prejudice they imply. Unless the situation really changes, in time, the euphemism attracts the negative connotation, and we find ourselves adopting a still newer term. This is especially obvious in words that relate to racialized groups, but it is just as true of those that relate to aging and old people. When we finally achieve the elimination of our discomfort, we will no longer need euphemisms.

Euphemisms can also be used humorously. Take the term "senior moment." This phrase is often used lightheartedly to diffuse embarrassment when someone has a momentary lapse of memory of someone's name or has a word on the tip of their tongue. You may have used it yourself. To get the joke, we must connect being old with memory loss or functional incompetence. Without the stereotype, the phrase would not be funny (Bonnesen and Burgess 2004). These jokes about being old should alert us to the presence of negative stereotypes regarding aging. These stereotypes may lead us to expect old people to suffer from dementia at worst or at least diminished cognitive capacity and judgment. We feel more comfortable with jokes related to being old than with any other group, and this includes among Bahá'ís. As we get older, many of us internalize these stereotypes and, in a sense, become prejudiced against ourselves.

Learning to be old is learning to live in a society that devalues old people and believes them to be inferior and uninteresting. Our propensity for age segregation exacerbates this situation. Recent decades have seen a tremendous rise in the presence of 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.

We, as a society, have shown little concern about age segregation. We seem to see it as natural. And, as I have long argued, age segregation is both a cause and an effect of ageism. We know that segregation increases prejudice, but seem unconcerned when it applies to age segregation. This is also often the case in Bahá’í communities (at least in the West) where youth and old members of the community do not often work together and may not attend the same events. Shoghi Effendi has pointed out that: “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.” (From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, January 4, 1936)

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

As we know, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spent most of his childhood and adult life incarcerated in the prison-city of Akka in what was then Palestine. After spending 56 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 65—the age that we often think of as the standard retirement age. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s first act was to visit the grave of His Father where He resumed carrying water on Fridays and Saturdays to nourish the garden He had planted there. His friends and family worried that this labour 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? ‘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 was but the first step in his reaching the West to deliver, in person, His message of peace and the oneness of humanity. Shoghi Effendi, in *God Passes By*, wrote:

‘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 Bab'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.

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).

I found it interesting 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, this way 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 his wonderful book, *'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" (Quoted 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 meetings, meetings with individuals, and travels that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá undertook during His time in America are astonishing both in number and in 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. Here is an example from the *Diary of Juliet Thompson*:

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! (p. 285).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Himself, commented on His age and physical condition to encourage the Bahá’ís to strive beyond what they might have felt as their own limitations. Here are a couple of examples,

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 into a lofty tree (PUP, 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).

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 Akka 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 Akka 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. In books about His life, we read account after account of thousands upon thousands who came to hear His talks and of His willingness to greet every last individual personally. We read of 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 us with 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 unflinching 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. (Balyuzi, 441-2)

'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. I often think of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's being freed from prison as a type of retirement just as our retiring may bring 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. 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!