Genesis in *King Lear*: Joseph's Many-Colored Coat Suits Shakespeare

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> "If we tire of the saints,
> Shakespeare is our city of refuge."
> — Ralph Waldo Emerson

Abstract
A luminary of five religions, Joseph of Egypt looms larger than life. Bahá'u'lláh even likens Himself to "the Divine Joseph" (*Gleanings* 103:4). However, Joseph's gradual unveiling as a minor prophet also renders him humanly relatable in ways a Manifestation of God can never be. In the West, Shakespeare and the Bible have each served as paths to knowledge, and their union a way to wisdom. That assertion proves especially true upon comparing Joseph's odyssey of becoming with Edgar's in *King Lear*. Both the prophet and the fictional character, each brother-betrayed, transform unjust adversity into psychological and spiritual growth. They each attain an exemplary sovereignty of self over and above their separate temporal kingships. A comparison of the two affords a deeper appreciation of Joseph's prominent place in scripture, particularly in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh.

Résumé
Luminaire de cinq religions, Joseph d'Égypte est un personnage plus grand que nature. Se référant à lui-même, Bahá'u'lláh s'est même décrit comme le « divin Joseph » (*Florilèges*, 103:4). Cependant, le fait que Joseph s'est dévoilé peu à peu en tant que prophète mineur lui confère aussi, de diverses façons, une dimension humaine que l'on ne pourrait jamais prêter à une Manifestation de Dieu. En Occident, Shakespeare et la Bible, pris séparément, ont servi de chemins vers la connaissance; conjugués, ils ont été une voie vers la sagesse. Cette affirmation se révèle particulièrement vraie si l'on compare l'odyssée de l'évolution de Joseph avec celle d'Edgar dans la pièce King Lear. Tous deux trahis par leurs frères, tant le prophète que le personnage de fiction transforment leur adversité injuste en croissance psychologique et spirituelle. Chacun d'eux atteint une souveraineté personnelle exemplaire au-delà de leurs royautés temporelles distinctes. Une comparaison des deux permet de mieux apprécier la place prééminente de Joseph dans les Écritures, en particulier dans les Écrits de Bahá'u'lláh.

Resumen
Una luminaria de cinco religiones, Joseph de Egipto parece más grande que la vida. Bahá'u'lláh incluso se compara con "el Divino Joseph" (*Gleanings* 103:4). Sin embargo, la presentación gradual de Joseph como un profeta menor también lo hace humanamente identificable en formas en que una Manifestación de Dios nunca puede ser. En Occidente, Shakespeare y la Biblia han servido como caminos hacia el conocimiento, y su unión como un camino hacia la sabiduría. Esa afirmación resulta especialmente cierta al comparar la odisea de Joseph de convertirse con la de Edgar

en *King Lear*. Tanto el profeta como el personaje ficticio, cada uno traicionado por su hermano, transforman la adversidad injusta en un crecimiento psicológico y espiritual. Cada uno de ellos alcanza una soberanía ejemplar de sí mismo por encima de sus reinos temporales separados. Una comparación de los dos ofrece una apreciación más profunda del lugar prominente de Joseph en las Escrituras, particularmente en los Escritos de Bahá'u'lláh.

The remarkable figure of Joseph, known for his striking beauty—both physical and moral—shines as a luminary in the scriptures of five different religions. To Jews, he is the Abrahamic link between Moses and the twelve tribes of Israel. To Christians, he is a predecessor to the suffering Christ. To Muslims, he is a prophet—the only prophet to whom an entire chapter of the Qur'án is devoted. The very first work revealed by the Báb, on the first night of the Bábí Dispensation, was His commentary on this Surah of Joseph. Thus, over millennia, and through multiple spiritual dispensations, Joseph looms as a larger-than-life figure, seemingly unapproachable and inimitable. His spotless chastity alone renders him a most formidable male role model.

Shakespeare's character of Edgar helps us in approaching the seemingly peerless Joseph. However, before undertaking that comparison, fairness dictates that we underscore Joseph's matchless influence. Numerous Bahá'í scholars have written of him at length, likening Joseph to "a kaleidoscopic motif" (Stokes) present wherever one turns in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh. "Imagine the Bahá'í writings," poses Todd Lawson, "without those four tropes of the Covenant, fragrance, the garment and beauty. And there are many more Josephian tropes throughout the Bahá'í corpus than those four" (*Return of Joseph*).

Edgar and Joseph are both examples of the betrayed brother, an archetype as ancient as Cain and Abel and one as lethal a threat in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's life as in Bahá'u'lláh's. However Joseph, unlike Edgar, also serves as a divine archetype. Identified as a prophet in the Kitáb-i-Íqán (212, 254), Joseph represents the all-forgiving Sufferer, the imprisoned Promised One, the longed-for Beloved, as well as the gradually unveiled divine Manifestation. So powerful is Joseph as a transcendent prototype that in the first book revealed by the Báb's, the Qayyúmu'l-Asmá', we see that "Joseph symbolizes the Báb Himself" (Saiedi 142), while Shoghi Effendi identifies Bahá'u'lláh as "the true Joseph" (23). And yet, unlike the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, Joseph is not a Manifestation of God, but a minor prophet."[1] Therefore, Joseph can also

1 "Bahá'u'lláh explained that the Divine Will of God does sometimes choose ordinary people as 'prophets' and inspires them to play certain roles in human affairs. Examples include the Hebrew prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah. Still others have been inspired as 'seers' or' 'saints.' Not even the prophets, however, are anywhere close to the station of the Manifestations, Who provide humankind with God's infallible Revelation. The prophets are still ordinary men and women whose powers of inspiration have been developed and used by God"

serve as a human archetype. Whereas the Manifestation of God possesses innate knowledge, reveals the Creative Word, and exemplifies a perfected state of being, a prophet, like other human beings, is a *created* work in progress—in a state of becoming.

When it comes to human nature, no writer has portrayed and dramatized our psychological depth and complexity like William Shakespeare. In his plays, the created word attains its loftiest heights. In fact, Harold Bloom, the modern dean of Shakespearean scholarship, elevates the Bard of Avon's plays to a station just below that of the Creative Word—as evidenced by the title of his text, *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human.* As the literary critic Robert Atwan is moved to remark:

> It is a gigantic, intriguing—and by all means a provocative—leap from imagining a Shakespeare who is the "sphere of humanity" to imagining that he outright *invented* humanity. But what exactly does that mean? . . .
>
> When Shakespeare began to write there was very little systematic study of the human mind and emotions. However, when Bloom claims that Shakespeare invented the human, he doesn't merely mean that he pioneered these psychological fields in literature before they became established in what gradually became our modern disciplines. According to Bloom, Shakespeare—especially in his creation of Falstaff and Hamlet—so utterly altered human consciousness that after him the world was a different place and we were different creatures. In other words, Shakespeare *re-created* humanity. (Atwan)

One might contend that Bloom is given to hyperbole, if not idolatry, especially when he claims that if "any author has become a mortal god, it must be Shakespeare" (*Shakespeare* 3). Then again, we might very well say to him, as King Lear says to his daughter Cordelia, "You have some cause" (Shakespeare 4.7.74). In fact, in Shakespeare's *King Lear,* we see the human prototype of Joseph portrayed in the character of Edgar. Whereas Joseph as divine archetype—and as an exemplar of male chastity—can prove intimidating, Joseph's human incarnation as Edgar helps readers grasp that personal transformation is more readily within their reach.

In contrast to Joseph, who is found in the scriptures of so many religions and whose story is known by so many followers of those religions, Edgar is by no means the first dramatic hero who leaps to the mind of even the most ardent lover of Shakespearean tragedy. And yet, upon comparing their mutual odysseys of transformation, we discover a psychological depth to Joseph and a metaphysical depth to Edgar. The former suddenly becomes more humanly imitable; the latter more spiritually heroic. As they raise themselves out of

(Hatcher and Martin 115).

the lowest depths of the most violent tests—both favored by fathers, then betrayed by brothers—these men evolve as consummate archetypes for weathering unjust adversity**.** On their ascent from naked homelessness, eschewing self-pity and blame, both sons inhabit numerous social roles, defining themselves by none, identifying themselves instead with a quest for self-mastery. As a result, they attain a sovereignty over self as forces for good in society. As wayfarers on life's journey, Joseph and Edgar prove as persevering as Odysseus, and as relatable as anyone who has ever had to start over again.

Can Clothes Make the (Hu)man?

> "A tailor make a man?"
> — *King Lear* 2.2.58

Just as we often change clothes for different roles or tasks (to go on a hike, on a date, or on a job interview), our dreams about clothing (coats, shoes, hats) might be seen as symbolizing a possible or necessary role change. In like manner, dreams of being naked often indicate the vulnerability of our current persona or way of being. Wearing a disguise is an intentional concealing of identity, sometimes to hide from our weaknesses, sometimes to experiment with other ways of engaging with the world (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 316). So when the Joseph of *Genesis* receives a coat of many colors from his father Jacob, we pay attention (Genesis 37:3).

As a rainbow includes all color possibilities, such a garment suggests the many roles Joseph will inhabit during the adventures of his mythic life. However, Shakespeare gives us no symbolic rainbow robe in the comfortless *King Lear.* We receive no hint that Edgar will also evolve into a man for all seasons. But like Joseph, Edgar proves to be equally multifaceted when, multi-garbed as an outcast, he evolves exemplary skills for weathering unjust adversity. Both youths thus personify how one can blossom by becoming a master of transformation. It is no wonder that Joseph *is* the last word in *Genesis* and Edgar *has* the last word in Shakespeare's great drama. The characters of both great works deserve our close attention, if we too would be king—not of Egypt or Britain—but of the multiple identities we disguise ourselves with. "Let all be set free from the multiple identities that were born of passion and desire," 'Abdu'l-Bahá urges, "and in the oneness of their love for God find a new way of life" (*Selections* 36:3).

At the outset of their stories, both Joseph and Edgar are flawed, naïve young men. Joseph foolishly—even boastfully—tells his brothers of two inflated dreams he has had. In one, he says, the sun, moon and stars bowed down to him. In the other, his brothers bowed down to him. His father scolds him for recounting such dreams. Jacob knows his other sons are already envious of their younger brother because he himself favors Joseph. But Jacob unwisely makes no effort to hide his

preference—even gifting only Joseph with a beautiful coat. Alas, Joseph compounds the problem. Whether naïve, vain or willfully blind, the youth flaunts his favorite-son status:

So with this coat, this very fancy and high-priced coat, Joseph goes sashaying in to his brothers and says, "Oh, and another thing, boys, I had a dream last night that you all are going to be bowing down to me." Whether Joseph was arrogant or what, a lot of the Muslim exegesis says he was put in the well of his own self love; that, in fact, he has a reputation for being very much in love with himself in the Haggadah—the stories of the prophets that accompany the Quranic tale, in the legends of the Jews that you read you see that Joseph was considered almost effeminate because of his beauty, and waltzing around the compound and lording it over the others because of this beauty (Lawson).

Consequently, Joseph first appears, not as a perfect exemplar, but as a work in progress. Later, in Egypt, when Potiphar's wife Zuleikha repeatedly attempts to seduce him, and even makes him strut his handsome stuff for her female friends, Joseph struggles to remain chaste. "O my Lord! I prefer the prison to compliance with their bidding," he is moved to pray, "but unless Thou turn away their snares from me, I shall play the youth with them, and become one of the unwise" (Qur'án 12:31–33). When spurned, Zuleikha falsely accuses Joseph of rape and has him imprisoned. Yet again, he displays understandable human frailty. As a fellow prisoner is released, Joseph asks the freed man to put in a good word for him with their mutual former master. However, if God is sufficient unto him, the Qur'án suggests, in Him alone should the trusting trust: "But Satan caused him to forget the remembrance of his Lord, so he remained some years in prison" (Qur'án 12:42).[2] As the Haggadah explains, "Satan induced Joseph to place his confidence in man, rather than in God alone, in punishment of which sin the imprisonment was continued" (Roswell 234).

Indeed, Joseph's "sin" might very well make us wonder how fully any of us trusts in God. After all, who among us has not sought favor or influence from a fellow human being rather than from the All-Sufficing? Thus, the delayed and gradual unveiling of Joseph as a prophet allows him to be portrayed with flaws and perceived as a relatable human being. It is no wonder that for three thousand years people have both revered and empathized with Joseph, and that the Prophet Muhammad called his story "the most beautiful of stories" (Qur'án 12:3). Nonetheless, the initial naïveté of both Joseph and Edgar invites malevolent reactions out of all proportion to their innocent natures. Joseph's envious brothers actually set out to murder him: "Come let us slay the dreamer. . . and we will see what will become of his dream" (Genesis 37:19–20). In Shakespeare's play, Edmund, the

2 This incident might lead the reader to recall a powerful verse taught to other falsely imprisoned believers by Bahá'u'lláh, three millennia later.

bastard brother of Edgar, also seethes with envy because of their father's preferential treatment of his "legitimate" son. Blind to his brother's envy, Edgar, "[w]hose nature is so far from doing harms/ That he suspects none" (Shakespeare 1.2.185–86) gullibly accepts embittered Edmund's lies (about their father's alleged wrath) as truth. Like Joseph, he too loses his home, and almost his life, due to brotherly deceit. Both Joseph and Edgar find themselves exiled—not just from their homes—but also from their selves. "Edgar I nothing am" (2.3.21). Both men are stripped of their garments of identity, as well as being literally stripped naked: Joseph of his coat of many colors and Edgar "the naked fellow" (4.1.40) of all but a blanket—"else we had been all shamed," quips the Fool about such scant covering (3.4.64). Both sons are disrobed of their grandiose sense of self as the favorite child. According to Shakespeare's drama, naked or "unaccommodated man," stripped of the "lendings" of civilization—social personas and comforting self-concepts—becomes reduced to "the thing itself." And unless "such a poor, bare, forked animal" re-creates himself in his Maker's image, he will remain "no more than this" (3.4.101-107). The character of King Lear presents a sobering example of how painfully difficult is the human challenge to personally transform ourselves into the "better angels of our nature" (Lincoln). However, a ray of light penetrates this bleak play about parents and offspring. As a counterpoint to the comfortless king, Lear's godson Edgar labors mightily through his own travails and painfully rebirths himself as a true child of God.

At the outset of their mutual journeys of transformation, both Edgar and Joseph are thrown down the social ladder to its lowest rung. Through the machinations of their envious brothers, each becomes nameless and homeless. After his brothers leave him for dead, Joseph is sold into slavery. He next become a household servant, then an overseer of servants. Next, he is a prisoner falsely accused of rape (for refusing to commit adultery—and stripped naked a second time!), then an overseer in prison. He moves ever upward in the ranks, gaining the position of second in command to Pharaoh—and finally de facto ruler of Egypt. On his own personal odyssey, after being betrayed by his brother, Edgar also moves through many personas: as a disinherited son, a fugitive, Poor Tom the mad beggar, a disgraced servant, a peasant, a messenger, a masked knight all in black, and, finally, king of Britain. Thus, Joseph and Edgar come to embody the true crown of human creation—as role models of re-birth and transformation. Throughout the course of their many trials and tribulations, both characters do not merely survive or make do; they achieve a sovereignty of self through service to others:

> On account of [the human soul's] progression to the stages of nearness and reunion and its descent into the regions of perdition and error, it is clothed in each

> stage and station in clothes that are different from the previous. (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, qtd. in Dunbar 48)

Desert Time

> “The worst is not,
> So long as we can say, ‘This is the worst.’”
>
> — *King Lear* 4.1.27–28

The details of Joseph and Edgar’s painful evolutions into exemplary human beings both instruct and encourage us. After all, most of us have had to re-invent ourselves many times in the course of our lives. We all have had dreams dashed (like Joseph) and hopes deferred (like Edgar). And many of us have had to start over again—in another career, country or household. So how did these two formerly favorite sons pull off so difficult a transformation? That’s the real story.

Many people initially react to unjust adversity with self-pity accompanied by accusatory blame. Both are justified reactions to injustice. However, both responses are also obstacles to personal growth. Anger too, in such situations, can be justified. After all, Joseph and Edgar were innocent victims of their own brothers’ betrayal; they have a right to be angry. That said, they both wisely choose to be fulfilled, rather than to be right. As way stations on the path of life, self-pity, blame and anger make miserable places to live. Resentment often proves to be the root of corruption (Peterson, *Cain and Abel*). It renders both self and society worse off. Evidently aware of this truth, Joseph and Edgar navigate the narrow straits of self-pity and blame without beaching on either deadly shoal.

The Bible says it is a pit into which Joseph’s brothers toss him (Genesis 37:24); the Qur’án (12:10) says it is an empty well. In any event, Joseph finds himself down in a hole, “deep and dark, a place where all differentiations and distinctions are obliterated—the unfathomable realm of utter effacement and nothingness” (Saiedi 149). But “when you ain’t got nothing,” as Bob Dylan sings, “you got nothing to lose” (“Like a Rolling Stone”). All is possible. Like Jonah in the belly of the whale or an entombed Christ, Joseph is in the darkness of a womb. Therefore, consciously or not, he and Edgar both grope toward rebirth. Neither bemoans the darkness. Moving toward the light, they not only accept the roles thrust upon them, but also evince an attitude that transforms their straitened circumstances into opportunities. Both characters have an aptitude for adapting. Fugitive Edgar not only varies his disguise, but also alters his voice and dialect. Joseph directs scenes, utilizes props and, feigning ignorance of his native tongue, speaks to his brothers through an interpreter. Both young men amaze us with their ability to create various personas to survive. Moreover, they avoid the pitfall of defining themselves by these social roles. They intuitively seem to know that “career” is derived from the Latin word for “road” not “profession,” and that career paths entail diverse social and occupational

roles. At the same time, they exemplify how one's "vocation"—from the Latin for the verb "to call"—is a singular calling to fulfill one's unique purpose and personal potential:

> O Lord! Whether traveling or at home, *in my occupation or in my work*, I place my whole trust in Thee . . . Bestow upon me my portion, O Lord, as Thou pleasest, and cause me to be satisfied with whatsoever Thou hast ordained for me. (The Báb, *Bahá'í Prayers* 56; emphasis added)

Both the Bible (1 Corinthians 10–13) and the Qur'án (2:286) maintain with Bahá'u'lláh that "God hath never burdened any soul beyond its power" (Gleanings 52:2). However, many of us have a lower estimation of our "power" to endure life's violent tests than God does. Both Joseph and Edgar amaze us not only with their endurance, but also with their acceptance of suffering. Like the oyster shell embracing an irritating grain of sand and transforming it into a pearl, Joseph and Edgar accept their unjust and unfortunate "desert time" as a necessary stage on their road ("career") toward the Promised Land of personal spiritual fulfillment. So even though Edgar reminds his despairing father (and himself) that, "Men must endure their going hence, even as their coming hither; ripeness is all" (Shakespeare 5.2.9–11), Edgar does more than merely endure. Like Joseph, he gallantly wills his way through the dark of the birth canal toward "ripeness." Even if at times he seems to know better what not to do (despair, complain, get angry) than what to do, he always acts. He pays attention to—and gives intention to—his attitude. Both Edgar and Joseph personify why "Men must [embrace] their going hence, even as their coming hither; [response] is all!" (Shakespeare 5.2.10–12).

If anger, self-pity and blame are inadequate reactions to adversity, what then is the most productive response? After the 9/11 tragedy in New York, the Dalai Lama advised, rather than to lay blame, to "seek cause" (*Reflection on 9/11*). Such a meditation requires an opening of the heart as well as of the mind. Again Joseph and Edgar model such a response. When his brothers show up in Egypt, Joseph embraces his youngest brother and then has to turn away to hide his tears. When Edgar sees what a piteous condition his recently blinded father has been reduced to by treacherous Edmund, he also hides his tears. Whether we view Joseph as a prophet gradually unveiling his potentiality or Edgar as a fictional character undergoing growth, they both demonstrate empathetic compassion rather than indulging in resentful anger.

His brothers have come to Egypt begging, so Joseph could easily send them off empty-handed in retaliation. Edgar, too, could take his unwise father to task. Gloucester not only rashly and falsely accuses him, but also misjudges his son's essential character. If Joseph were the hero of a modern action film, he would seek revenge on his brothers.

Instead he seeks spiritual growth—not only his, but theirs as well. First, he falsely accuses his youngest brother Benjamin (his father's new favorite) of stealing, and then insists on taking him as ransom. Joseph is purposely testing his brothers to see if they are once again willing to dispose of a sibling receiving their father's preferential treatment. Later, when he bestows gifts upon his brothers, Joseph gives Benjamin more in quality and quantity than he gives the others. Will they once again act out vilely with envy? Given the chance to grow, his brothers pass both tests with flying colors. Thus, during his odyssey of becoming, Joseph has put not only his own self in order—as well as Egypt and Palestine by saving them from famine—but also his family. Having nurtured self and society to fruition by fostering the "utmost love and harmony," he attains, according to Bahá'u'lláh, "the *monarch* of all aspirations (*Gleanings* 132:4; emphasis added). Pharaoh has made Joseph proxy king (*Genesis* 41:39–44), but Bahá'u'lláh will make him—and all who demonstrate such spiritually sovereign qualities—"*monarchs* in the realms of My Kingdom" (*Summons* 64; emphasis added).

Likewise, Edgar, by eschewing resentment, revenge, and any personal agenda, utilizes various disguises and dialects in order to serve his exiled father's needs. He literally and metaphysically eases Gloucester back from the brink of despair. "I do trifle thus with his despair," he says in an aside, "to cure it" (Shakespeare 4.6.34-35). Moreover, when Edgar appears masked as a black knight to duel his brother Edmund, his motive is not personal revenge. His faceless disguise is not a ploy of deception as much as a statement of negation. Not only is Edgar nameless—"My name is lost" (5.3.122)—but so too is Britain without a king. "Who is it," wonders Lear without his crown, "that can tell me who I am?" (1.4.235). Without a sovereign on the throne, chaos is loosed in the kingdom; without a sovereignty of self, chaos is loosed within.

Unveiling the Self

> "Off, off, you lendings! Come unbutton here."
>
> — *King Lear* 3.4.106–107

Upon slaying Edmund, Edgar not only gives a new birth of freedom to Britain as he saves it from the self-serving reign of Edmund and Goneril, but he also, in effect, becomes born again: "My name is Edgar," he declares, "and thy father's son" (Shakespeare 5.3.169). Moreover, with the same magnanimity that Joseph displays toward his brothers, Edgar tells his dying brother, deemed "illegitimate" by law: "I am no less in blood than thou art, Edmund" (5.3.167). Unlike their father, Edgar sees beyond the bounds of biology. He regally affirms the one true brotherhood—of all humanity. Such sovereignty (over limited and limiting views of human nature) embraces both shadow and light—within one's self and within society.

Tellingly, Joseph and Edgar remain in disguise throughout their initial re-encounters with their families. Joseph does so in order to discern if his brothers have evolved beyond their deceitful and deadly ways. Only then, weeping with human compassion, does he reveal himself—with more than human insight:

> I am Joseph your brother, whom ye sold into Egypt. Now therefore be not grieved, nor angry with yourselves, that ye sold me hither: for God did send me before you to preserve life. . . . God sent me before you to preserve you a posterity in the earth, and to save your lives by a great deliverance. So now it was not you that sent me hither, but God. (Genesis 45:4–8)

Joseph unveils himself not just as a brother, but as a prophet, immediately foretelling future events. Yet, with the most human show of affection "he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck, and wept; and Benjamin wept upon his neck. Moreover he kissed all his brethren, and wept upon them" (Genesis 45:14–15). With such a moving denouement, the story of Joseph proves indeed to be "the most beautiful of stories" (Qur'án 12:3).

For his part, Edgar conceals his identity from his forlorn father lest the shock of recognition drive blind Gloucester deeper into despair. A resentful, vengeful son would have self-righteously reveled in throwing the true facts into his father's face. But Edgar, selflessly more concerned with comforting his father, guides him step by step away from despondency toward hope. Eventually he succeeds in helping him to see—not physically, but metaphysically. "You ever-gentle gods," Gloucester then prays. "Let not my worser spirit tempt me again/To die before you please!" (Shakespeare 4.6.213–15). Only at this juncture, when his father can bear self-recognition, does Edgar, after having "wait[ed] patiently for that naked hour of self-revelation," reveal his identity (Bloom, *Lear* 109).

Somehow, both Joseph and Edgar manage to foil their family members from seeing through their disguises. Such masterful deception may seem incongruous, but it is not incidental. One must will to be seen as one's true self. We may choose when and to whom we reveal ourselves (or not), but we ourselves must do the unfolding. "I myself am a question which is addressed to the world, and I must communicate my answer, for otherwise," warned Carl Jung, "I am dependent upon the world's answer" (318).

Meanwhile, as the Fool reminds Lear, the clock is ticking: "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise" (Shakespeare 1.5.46–47). While we dally and delay, "our pleasant vices/Make instruments to plague us" (5.3.170–71). Thus, our life's chief work is the art of becoming—of manifesting our sovereign self—before it is too late and we are too "canker-bit" (5.3.122) to flower. The fruit of such unfolding is the

saving/serving of self and society, even if our "little world of man" (3.1.10) is confined to a household or workplace. The cost of not unfolding one's potential is imprisonment—in the mask of social roles, postures and personas that protect the ego but fail to fulfill the self.

The book of Genesis has somewhat of a "happily ever after" ending, as Joseph assumes his rightful place in the lineage of Abraham, destined, as it is, to birth numerous Manifestations of God as descendents. Shakespeare's mythic tale is darker. On his "pilgrimage" of becoming, (Shakespeare 5.3.196) Edgar loses both his father and godfather to death—and to regret's dark abyss. Although at play's end he restores order to Britain and prepares to ascend its throne, Edgar does not appear eager to rule. However, his reluctant yet willing acceptance of the burden of kingship makes him all the more heroic and prophet-like. Of those who have responsibility thrust upon them, and accept such pains for the good of society, rather than for fame or gain, Shakespeare says:

> They rightly do inherit heaven's graces,
> And husband nature's riches from expense;
> They are the lords and owners of their faces,
> Others, but stewards of their excellence. (Sonnet 194)

Such personal sacrifice "makes sacred"—as the word's Latin root indicates—and "upon such sacrifices," Lear eventually learns, "the gods themselves throw incense" (Shakespeare 5.3.20–21).

In brief, the story of Joseph is the tale of a dream and its ultimate fulfillment through the agency of character, consciousness, and compassion. Edgar's story reads more like a nightmare—from which he awakes through the agency of character, consciousness, and compassion. However, the dreamscape in both stories represents ultimate reality—the coming of age into one's true self. In Joseph's case, it is the unveiling of himself as a prophet, before whom, his brothers in fact—as in his dream—"bowed down themselves before him with their faces to the earth" (Genesis 42:6).

> The story of Joseph was the story of a dream and its subsequent fulfillment . . . Thus it is the dream that represents the supreme reality—the realm of divine creative Action—while the historical realization of the dream in the world is a mere phenomenal reflection of that eternal truth. (Saiedi 159)

Significantly, both Edgar and Joseph's stories remind us that such fulfillment can only occur if we leave our father's house; that is, if we transcend inherited tradition and heed our personal calling ("vocation"). After all, parents (representing the past) often are blind to who we might become (the future). No matter how much they love us—or we love them—they cannot hear for us that intuitive "still, small

voice within" (1 Kings 19:12) that whispers only privately:

> Cleanse thy heart from every blasphemous whispering and evil allusion thou hast heard in the past, that thou mayest inhale the sweet savours of eternity from the Joseph of faithfulness, gain admittance into the celestial Egypt, and perceive the fragrances of enlightenment. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Gems* 23)

Likewise, just as both sons in these two stories must forsake their childish outer selves in order to discover (or unveil) their mature inner selves, both their fathers must forsake their outward eyes in order to open the eyes of insight:

> O My Brother! Until thou enter the Egypt of love, thou shalt never gaze upon the Joseph-like beauty of the Friend; and until, like Jacob, thou forsake thine outward eyes, thou shalt never open the eye of thine inward being." (Bahá'u'lláh, *Call of the Divine Beloved* 19)

After bestowing "changes of raiment" (Genesis 45:22) upon his brothers (symbolic of their rebirth as more enlightened beings), Joseph gives them his own garment.[3] "Go with this my shirt, and cast it over the face of my father," he instructs them, "and he will come to see again" (Qur'án 12:93). Now that Joseph has donned the vesture of his true self, such raiment becomes transformative for others as well. By inhabiting our potential self, we become capable of giving vision to others—even opening the eyes of a parent who may not have seen us—or our potential—clearly. With the unfolding of the shirt of one's true self, the father's gift of life to the son (the many-colored coat of many possibilities) becomes the son's gift of a happy death to the father:

> O my God . . . divest the bodies of Thy servants of the garments of mortality and abasement, and attire them in the robes of Thine eternity and Thy glory. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Prayers and Meditations* 184:11)

Likewise, the grieving Lear admits at the end of his drama, "Mine eyes are not o'th'best" (Shakespeare 5.3.277). However, in truth, his inner vision is sharp for the first time. As he holds his dead daughter in his arms, like an inverse *Pietà*, Lear visually echoes blind Gloucester's words of recognition about Edgar: "I stumbled when I saw . . . Might I live to see thee in my touch, I'd say I had eyes again!" (4.1.19–23). Recognition of his daughter's selfless love awakens Lear from "the heaviness of sleep" and allows him to don "fresh garments" (4.7.20-12). "'Bring forth the best robe, and put it on him'," writes Jesuit scholar Milward, quoting the parable of the Prodigal Son, while comparing Lear to "the Pauline image of putting on 'the new man'" (194). Fittingly,

3 The ritual changing of garment marks the passage from one world to another" (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 316).

humbled Lear's final command is a polite request: "Pray you, undo this button" (Shakespeare 5.3.307). His last words express a willingness to shed the physical garment of his body. However, like Jacob, Lear now is open-eyed as he embraces death:

> We find that at the very end, his sorrow—like that of Gloucester in the parallel story—changes to sudden joy as he looks on the lips of his child; and in that joy he dies. What he sees on her lips is no longer the darkness of death but a light that shows him what Shakespeare elsewhere [*Measure for Measure* 5.1.398] calls a "better life past fearing death." (Milward 157–58)

After the death of his father Gloucester, Edgar speaks magnanimous words to his dying, deceitful brother. Personal revenge has no place in an ordered society. "Let's exchange charity," he says, "The gods are just" (Shakespeare, 5.3.170). Such selfless, heroic stature gives vision, however belatedly, even to malevolent Edmund: "This speech of yours hath mov'd me / And shall perchance do good" (5.3.199–200), he says while dying. "Some good I mean to do/Despite of mine own nature" (5.3.242–43). Similarly, after the death of his father, Joseph ends *Genesis* with comforting words to his brothers, as they once again fear his vengeance. "Ye thought evil against me," he tells them, "but God meant it unto good… to bring to pass," he adds prophetically, "the saving of many people" (Genesis 50:20). Joseph, like Edgar, speaks not only as a man of faith, but also as one with conscious knowledge, born of experience.

How a person can come to have such penetrating and expansive vision—so as to even glimpse divine purpose behind the shifting shapes of this nether world? Shakespeare's play gives hint. "If thou canst serve where thou dost stand condemn'd"—even unjustly, even by your own brother—and, having willingly "razed" the "likeness" of your former self-concept, still manage to maintain your "good intent," then you "may carry through to that full issue," which is the birth of your sovereign self (1.4.1–5).

And then—to emend poets Kipling and Frost—you'll be a king, my son, and that will make all the difference:

> Were the dominions of the whole, entire earth to be thine, it would not equal this great dominion . . . [T]hou hast established an eternal and everlasting throne through the guidance of God, and hast become crowned with a diadem, the gems of which scintillate throughout the centuries and ages; nay, rather, for cycles and periods!
> ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablets* 254–55)

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