

Ninth Hasan M. Balyúzí Memorial Lecture

Faith, Protest, and Progress*

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Abstract

Spirituality or faith requires individuals to embody the principles and values that promote the positive development of human beings and human society. Confronted with aspects of human society that are inconsistent with those principles, individuals may be faced with the necessity of protest. Protest does not have to mean violence, but rather the courage to reject the false and unjust. Such protest based on faith can have a transforming effect on both the individual and society. In this essay, examples from the experience of African Americans are used to demonstrate the transforming effect on society of individual courageous acts.

Résumé

La spiritualité ou la foi requiert que les individus manifestent les principes et les valeurs qui favorisent l'épanouissement des êtres humains et de la société humaine. Lorsqu'ils sont confrontés à des aspects de la société humaine qui sont incompatibles avec ces principes, les individus peuvent devoir recourir à la protestation. La protestation ne signifie pas nécessairement de recourir à la violence, mais plutôt de rejeter courageusement ce qui est faux et injuste. Une telle protestation fondée sur la foi peut avoir un effet transformateur tant sur l'individu que sur la société. Cet article démontre, par des exemples tirés de l'expérience des Américains d'origine africaine, comment des gestes courageux posés par des individus peuvent avoir un effet transformateur sur la société.

Resumen

La espiritualidad o fe requiere que los individuos encarnen los principios y valores que promueven el desarrollo positivo de los seres humanos y de la sociedad humana. Al presentárseles aspectos de la sociedad no consistentes con aquellos principios, los individuos quizá se enfrenten con la necesidad de protestar. La protesta no necesariamente significa violencia, sino tener el valor de rechazar lo falso y lo injusto. Tales protestas basadas en fe pueden efectuar una transformación tanto en el individuo como en la sociedad. En esta disertación, se busca demostrar ese efecto transformador sobre la sociedad de los actos individuales valerosos, usando ejemplos de lo experimentado por los americanos de origen africano.

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I recall a passage in one of the Bahá'í prayers, which says, "He whom the grace of Thy mercy aideth, though he be but a drop, shall become the boundless ocean . . ." (*Bahá'í Prayers* 32). If there is anything of value in what you see before you, let us say it is from the grace of God. I am deeply grateful to the Association for Bahá'í Studies for the privilege of sharing in the consultations of this conference. It is my hope that the follow through of the conference, when we all return to our home communities, will motivate us to significant attitudes and activities for positive change. My invitation to this evening asked me to share with you some of my personal experiences. This I shall do in the perspective of three things: faith, protest, and progress.

Every human being born into this world begins a lifelong adventure of becoming and of overcoming the challenges of human experience. In the process of belief in a higher power and a purpose for existence, we are led to faith, a spiritual experience that both guides and empowers us to choose the values which promote, through action and reaction, the development of human beings and human society.

In dealing with human experience, one must accept or reject that which is inconsistent with the values and principles that one holds. In so doing, one may be faced with the necessity of protest. Protest is not necessarily violent or offensive action. To me, it is a consistent and abiding expression in attitude and action of an individual's deep commitment to values and principles that lead to progress and noble development of the human being and human society. The courage and commitment to reject that which is false and unjust involves a transforming spiritual power, and it is in this sense that, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá so beautifully expressed it, "Every child is potentially the light of the world—and at the same time its darkness . . ." (*Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá* 130).

In the struggle to handle and make sense of various human experiences, a Bahá'í learns to view them with perspective and to see in the situations confronting her or him a part of the process of human development, both for the individual and society. This is, I believe, the beginning of wisdom and deeper understanding. Thus, I have striven to understand my life as a member of an ethnic minority experiencing so many unpredictable, challenging, and abrasive encounters, and I have tried to relate them, in experiencing them, to a world perspective on the slow and often painful progress of human beings in all areas of this world.

This is to say that I, as an African American in the United States, understand that I could just as well be speaking as an Irish person brought up in England. Or, I could be a Jew in Poland, an Armenian in Turkey, a Chinese person who is not a member of the prevailing Han group in China, a Korean who must encounter the Japanese, a member of the untouchable caste in India, a Bahá'í in Iran, and an Ibo in Northern Nigeria. The need to meet—and overcome—experiences of injustice, oppression, and animosity is part of the human environment. It is that perspective in understanding what goes on in life which

has helped me to meet the challenges of human experiences more successfully and has counteracted the feelings of revenge and the susceptibility to hatred that come so easily.

In analyzing the challenges of my life as an African American in these United States, I see three periods, and experiences from them, which have had great influence on me. First, the pre-civil rights period of survival; next, the period of focus on civil rights; and last, the period of focus on *human* rights. This is the atmosphere in which I grew up and in which you are growing up also.

In the period of pre-civil rights, which I call “the period of survival,” there were no laws to protect the individual or a community of minority status. For an African American, there was a daily encounter with rejection, danger, and persecution based on prejudice and hostility. African-American survived in this period by using the defenses they had developed during the period of slavery. They learned to pool their strength in their segregated schools and churches, and other improvement organizations, where they were able to develop and promote the spirit of self-help, and to devise educational measures that stimulated motivation, a sense of self-worth and dignity, and action to persevere in overcoming obstacles and to achieve excellence. This was a period of great education for me. In this atmosphere I grew up protected by my family and community, motivated to overcome and achieve against great odds, and even to expect the abrasive challenges that were to come. The stories of my family prepared me for conflict. The religious teachings I was taught stressed faith and efforts to overcome adversity. Looking back, it is extremely interesting to me that the African Americans, brought to this country in slavery and taught Christianity, never accepted Christianity as a religion that would make them accept slavery and injustice. The Bible verses they studied, the spiritual songs they invented and sang, emphasized hope for a better time. And in accepting the belief in one God and in humanity as God’s children, they, too, chose to believe that even as the children of Israel were delivered from slavery and degradation in Egypt, their time would come and that some day they would achieve freedom, dignity, and recognition in the family of humankind.

My parents and their relatives told me two particular stories that have had a great influence on my life. The first was told to me by my mother about my maternal great-grandmother, Louisa Dodson, who married Mentor Dodson, a preacher. Both were born in slavery, but when slavery was ended, Mentor Dodson was elected to the House of Representatives of Alabama. Mentor’s election made him a target for the Ku Klux Klan, and there were few nights when he could get to his home and be with his family. As the story goes, one night, my great-grandmother Louisa was lying in bed with labor pains, for she was expecting the birth of her last child. The Klan came to her house, broke in the door, and came to her bedroom. She was alone with just her children. Pointing guns at her, they demanded that she tell them where her husband was. She looked them straight in the eye and said, “I won’t tell you where he is.” At

this, they fired bullets into the headstand of her bed and insisted that she tell them where to find him, or they would kill her. She said, "Just go ahead and kill me, because I will never tell you where he is." After more curses and threats and shots, they decided not to kill her and left. I was awed and inspired by that story, by her courage—a lone woman in a hostile, dangerous environment, and her determination not to give in to injustice and oppression, even at the risk of death. I have in certain incidents of my own life been reminded of and relied upon the memory of her courage and her strength.

The second story is about my paternal great-grandfather, McCracken, who was forced to leave his family when he was a young boy. As this story goes, McCracken's family were in slavery, but when their slave-master died, he left a will granting freedom to the slave family and giving them money to get them passage on one of the "freedom ships," which would take them to Liberia, then being resettled with freed slaves. The State of Kentucky, where they lived, gave the freedom and the money to the family, but refused to give it to little McCracken, a minor son. They said he would have to remain a ward of the State until he became of age and that his family could not be paid the money for him. Thus, that family was forced to the painful decision of deciding whether to give up the possibility of going away from a slave state and settling in a free area and leaving behind a minor child, or staying in Kentucky and keeping their son with the family. Can you imagine how they must have prayed and consulted about such a decision? They decided to take the money and the freedom and go to Liberia, because they knew the risks of being a freed slave in slave territory, but before they went, they urged young McCracken to go up into the Kentucky mountains and attach himself to a family of mountaineers. Now, you must understand that the mountaineers of Kentucky and Tennessee were the "po' white trash" who could not even afford the economic system of slavery, so they kept no slaves. This little boy went up into the mountains alone, found a family with the grace of God, took their name, and stayed with that family. He eventually married a mountaineer girl and raised a family of his own. His birth family went on to Liberia, where I was never able to find any trace of them. They may have died, or how they may have survived, I do not know. In any event, young McCracken, grown up and with a family of his own, was needled by the desire to improve his lot in life. So he quietly moved back from the mountains to a Kentucky city, obtaining work as a janitor in a bank, and there he managed to save and to buy a home.

One day, when he and his family were together, there was a knock at the door. He answered, and there stood a white visitor, who introduced himself as the son of their former master, who had dropped by "to see how they were doing." While the visitor was there, he saw McCracken's young daughter Jane, who was a very beautiful girl. He told McCracken that he would like to take Jane, bring her up, and educate her. McCracken did not take kindly to this idea. He said that he did not want to separate his children—he wanted to bring up and

educate his own children. The visitor did not seem to like this very much, and said, "Now, don't give me any trouble! I am going to take that girl and educate her, and you just have her ready for me when I return in a few days." With that, he left. Now, here is McCracken, still in a slave state, though he is emancipated, working as a janitor. He's managed to have a family and to establish himself, and here is trouble, looming large as life.

The next day, he went to his employer and with great resolution said, "Sir, I'm going to be in trouble, and I want you to know why." He then told him of the visitor and his demand, and with great resolution said to his employer, "If this man comes back, and attempts to take my child, I am going to kill him." The employer said, "Oh! Think about that! You know that if you do that, there will be a lynching in this city, and there will be great trouble. Consider this, McCracken, if you will just be quiet about the whole thing, go back to your family this evening, just take only what you can carry with you, and meet me at the boat dock. I will get passage for you on one of those boats going to Cincinnati, Ohio, which is free territory, and you can go there and reestablish your life." And that is what McCracken did. That is how McCracken, and his family, including Jane, who was my grandmother, came to Cincinnati as refugees. Jane was safely hidden with friends in the Underground Railway. In fact, she stayed a while in the family of Levi Coffin, one of its most distinguished directors. Slave runners did come over into Ohio from Kentucky, and there was word that they were looking for Jane, though she was not a slave. But what could she do? There was no law, in either Ohio or Kentucky, to protect her. Fortunately, she was able to avoid capture, to grow up, to marry a young coachman named Robert Austin, and to have four children, one of whom was my father, George Austin.

These are the kinds of stories that were shared by most African-American families with their children, teaching them the wisdom to make the sacrifices which had to be made, to learn to protest as they passed through the unpredictable experiences of their days, working for and believing in a better future.

In the second period of civil rights, the protests and the faith grew stronger. To bring progress, people sought justice through demonstrations, which often brought upon them violence and death. Rosa Parks stands out in this period. We can remember her quiet, simple protest, her refusal to give up her seat on a bus because she was an African American, and how that led to a groundswell of protest and the evolution of challenging leadership and effort for change, which brought laws protecting minorities from injustice and discrimination. Even in that period, there was the senseless martyrdom of the great leader Martin Luther King, Jr., which led to upheaval in this nation. This period is filled with countless stories of dramatic protest, of courage, of amazing sacrifice on the part of both whites and blacks who gave up their careers, and even in some cases their lives, for positive change.

At this point, I am moved to reflect upon the wisdom and courage of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, the magnificent teacher of the Bahá'í Faith who visited the United States near the end of the pre-civil rights period. It seems to me that his visit should be studied for its impact on the period and on the nation. 'Abdu'l-Bahá was indeed a role model for those who seek positive change. He took a firm stand. He spoke openly and forthrightly before the opinion-making institutions of the period: the churches, the universities, the community-improvement organizations. He shunned segregation and discrimination, even though it would have made things comfortable. He advocated human unity. He challenged racism and prejudice before black and white audiences. He advocated women's rights. He urged human beings to understand the unity of God, to abandon religious prejudice, and emphasized the necessity for the coming together of peoples. He took the Bahá'í principles to some of the most orthodox and conservative organizations of this country, without fear, without compromise.

There is a most interesting story of how he shocked official, diplomatic, and class-conscious Washington, DC. There was a most prestigious dinner party given for 'Abdu'l-Bahá by his hostess, who wanted him to impress the movers and shakers of Washington's diplomatic and political society. What did 'Abdu'l-Bahá do on the day of that dinner? He invited Louis G. Gregory, a young African-American lawyer, to come to see him near the time of the dinner. He talked with Louis Gregory, and when Louis Gregory, realizing that it was near the time of the dinner, sought to leave, 'Abdu'l-Bahá prevented him from leaving. When the time came for the guests to go into the dining room, 'Abdu'l-Bahá strode into the dining room, reorganized the table settings, creating a place next to his place, the guest of honor, for Louis Gregory, that young African-American lawyer, who was not at all well known or accepted among the distinguished invited guests.

What an object lesson that was! Today, Bahá'ís strive in many ways to follow that pattern set by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. They are demonstrating the courage to uphold their standards, to speak out against the falsities of tradition and custom, and to demonstrate what they believe. Although I was not a Bahá'í at that time and very young, after I became a Bahá'í I read that story and other stories about 'Abdu'l-Bahá. It did a lot for me. It made me see that there was hope for humanity, and that, with effort and leadership, we can move out of darkness, ignorance, and hostility.

Briefly, I will touch on the civil rights period, because by that time, the laws permitted me to go to school. I had not gone to school until I was 8 or 9 (in the South, there was no school for young children—there was a school for overage children) when my parents sent me to Cincinnati to stay with my father's relatives. There, I entered an all-black elementary school and stayed at that school until I graduated from the eighth grade. Then I went to Walnut Hills Classical High School, where my father had pioneered as the first black student, and took my seat with another little black girl in the history class on my first day.

On the desk of each student was a copy of *Meyers' History*, the official, approved textbook for the public schools. Now, most of you do not even know about Mr. Meyers, but Mr. Meyers, in his textbook, discussed the contributions of the races of humankind, with pictures, of course. And he talked about the gifts of the white race, the gifts of the red race, the gifts of the brown race. When he came to the gifts of the black race, his words, and I quote, were: "The black race has made no contribution to civilization. It seems that it must remain forever a hewer of wood and a drawer of water for the more fortunate races." Can you imagine? Two little black girls, in a school full of white children, in a classroom full of white children, and with the candor and the cruelty of the young, the entire class looked at us, and there were, of course, a few snickers and grins.

It was then that I remembered my great-grandmother. I felt as if the Klan were standing there with the guns turned on me. With great resentment and resolve, I stood up and said, "I was taught in a black school that Africans worked iron before Europeans knew anything about it. I was taught that they knew how to cast bronze in making statues and that they worked in gold and in ivory so beautifully that the European nations came to their shores to buy their carvings and statues. That's what I was taught, in a black school." There was an electric silence. The teacher of that history class, Miss Purvis, a stalwart New Englander, bless her soul, spoke out. She said, "She's absolutely correct. This is not a true statement." She went on to outline some other contributions of African Americans, and that saved the day for us. But, friends, you can imagine, if there had been no protest, what ingrained prejudice and hostility would have been implanted in the minds of those children and what humiliation and degradation would have been stamped upon us?

The memory of that incident has made me always feel passionate about the absence of knowledge which people have about other people who are different. Even though they live with them and work with them, they do not know anything about their history, their aspirations, and their culture. In these days, when we have movements for programming African-American history and emphasis upon it, I pray that the interest in diversity will broaden. And I also pray that Bahá'ís, wherever they are, will seek to know more about African history, African-American history, American Indian history, Oriental history, and to make the study of history a cause for understanding the things that *unite* human beings—their survival from oppression, their efforts to overcome, their aspirations, and their achievements. Pioneers we can be, as Bahá'ís, in demonstrating the values in our belief about the oneness of humankind, and in being able to inform and give information which brings respect and dignity to all these delightful colors that make up the human race.

Let me tell you another story, of my freshman year at the University of Cincinnati, when as a member of its first integrated undergraduate class, I entered that institution. There had not been any blacks before my class. There

were, that year, four girls and four boys. The ground had been broken for us by a black principal of one of the black schools, Dr. Jennie D. Porter, who sought to get a PhD degree. The University of Cincinnati had informed her that it did not think that any African American could earn a PhD degree. They were not able to do this. She persisted and made them accept her, because it was a city university, and she worked like a dog for her degree, earning it with distinction. She was the groundbreaker, the pioneer, the protester, and we followed in her footsteps.

During the first week of our enrolment, an official from the university summoned us for a conference. When we arrived in her office, she took only the girls. She said, "Now, young ladies, I hope you will be as inconspicuous as possible on this campus. You belong to a subject race. We didn't want to take you, but we are a city university, and we had to take you. I hope you will go out and give us no trouble at all." We were young, sensitive, full of hope and aspiration for a university education—that speech traumatized us. We somehow got out of that office, and because in the communities from which we came, we were taught to have faith, to protest, and to take concerted action for progress, we called the boys. We sat down and discussed the situation, and then all eight of us decided we were going out for everything in the university. We almost took an oath in blood that we were *all* to finish that first year with honors in something, and, we decided to disseminate some information on the campus. So we took our nickels (because we did not have much more than that in those days), bought some paper, and duplicated a newsletter, which we called *The New Era*.

We did not burn down any buildings, we did not beat up anybody, but we published articles, as many as we could get, from university professors at the University of Cincinnati and at surrounding universities, about the importance of abolishing prejudice and abandoning discrimination, and we invited students from any university to send us creative writing and poetry. The magazine was a sellout at two cents a copy. Somehow, we made a difference. We worked harder, I am sure, than any other freshman students in that university. By the end of the year, each one of us did take an honor, and at the beginning of the next year, that same official who had called us in and insulted us, apologized for her remarks. I give her credit for it. She said she would welcome the incoming class of black students.

The current period in which we are all working has brought into focus human rights, within which there is focus not only upon minorities but also upon women's rights, and abandoning prejudice and bigotry. That is a wonderful step. I remember at this point, how I became a Bahá'í. As a young, angry, incensed, and hostile university student, I went to my father and said, "I'm going to become an agnostic or an atheist: I just don't believe anymore in these religions that are all separate, all fighting with each other, all enforcing prejudice against some group, and yet they say, 'God is the father of all

humankind’.” My father heard me out and then said, “Well, before you do it, why don’t you go and talk to these Cincinnati people who are talking about the Bahá’í Faith?” He was not a Bahá’í, but he said, “They have some very interesting views, and maybe that will interest you.” So I went and talked to the Bahá’ís. I took their literature around for two years to find things to argue about, and in the process, I began to believe. Such is the power of the Word. My confirming experiences were the activities and the attitudes of so many wonderful Bahá’ís who helped me overcome my bitterness. There was Mr. Louis G. Gregory, who taught classes about the Bahá’í Faith with culture, with gentility and forcefulness that impressed everybody. There was Dorothy Baker in Lima, Ohio, which had an atmosphere that was like a setting for the Ku Klux Klan, it was so rigid, and so mean. But Dorothy Baker opened her home for Bahá’í Firesides, to which came black and white inquirers from surrounding areas, who listened and became attracted to the teachings. So much was her home a center, that the ministry in her town attacked her, but she used it as an opportunity to teach the Bahá’í Faith, for she went to the radio station and asked if she could tell them what the Bahá’í Faith was about.

All of these people were confirming experiences for me—anxious, and sensitive, and tense as I was because of my bitter experiences. There are so many other people I could name, and perhaps someday I will write their stories so that they can inspire Bahá’ís. I have shortened this talk, lest it become like the mercy of God, in that it endures forever and passes all understanding. Suffice it to say that the confirming power of the Bahá’í Faith lies in the teachings themselves and the way we can encourage people to read, discuss, and understand them, and also the impact which we as individual Bahá’ís can make upon people when our attitudes and our actions are influenced by the principles of the Bahá’í Faith. I believe that we must think of the Bahá’í Faith as constituting a unique world community. We are operating in every theater of this world where there is tension and violence and hatred. We are a part of the whole. We are making a serious effort to pry human beings away from their alienating traditions, their comfortable ignorance, and their prejudice. But, we must try harder. We *must* try harder. Bahá’ís should understand that there are many people working for a better world today, but Bahá’ís have something special, which will reinforce us in the battles going on to change hearts, to transform lives, and to provide more than a token representation of our ability to take in minorities.

There are many amusing attitudes in the world today, and I think I ought to tell you about the black church to which, to its consternation, was assigned a white minister. The church congregation was in a tizzy about it. Some of the members would not attend church because they did not think it was time yet for that. (Where have you heard that before?) So we as Bahá’ís are working not only on the outside world but also on ourselves, because we, too, have a lot of baggage that needs to be cast overboard. But if we go about it with faith, with

intelligent protest, standing up and demonstrating what the right attitude and motivation is for human progress, we can *cause* progress. After all, the battle we face is essentially a spiritual battle to transform the souls and spirits of human beings, to empower them to express love and justice, and to develop a unity of conscience.

This makes me remember that marvelous letter of 'Abdu'l-Bahá to the Committee for Durable Peace, at the Hague, where he spoke about ending war and the causes of war. He said the essential for universal peace is "unity of conscience" (*Selections* 297) Why? Because unity of conscience makes us willing to be just, to "give others their due." I hope we will continue to work to overcome all the inward and outward obstacles to developing that unity of conscience in ourselves and in all we can touch.

The time for transformation is now. It cannot be put off, because hate and injustice are alive and well and attempting to thrive. Ethnic conflicts are growing, isolation and insularity are growing, people are choosing self-destructive ways to deal with the pressures, the pain, and the turmoil all around them. The Bahá'ís must have a faith that can demonstrate the great factors in Bahá'í history: courage and persistence, the ability to survive persecution, to go into inhospitable areas, to stay there, and to raise up communities that can withstand the pressures of ignorance, hostility, and prejudice. There is a Bahá'í prayer that can offer us guidance, strength, and determination. It is a prayer which talks about protest. It talks about faith, and it talks about progress:

O my God, aid Thou Thy servant to raise up the Word, and to refute what is vain and false, to establish the truth, to spread the sacred verses abroad, reveal the splendours, and make the morning's light to dawn in the hearts of the righteous.

Thou art verily the Generous, the Forgiving. ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 250)

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