

From the Editor's Desk

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SPIRITUALITY
AND THE POETIC VOICE

It is not by coincidence that we refer to the revealed utterances of the Manifestations of God as “verses.” The unsurpassed eloquence with which these Messengers speak is one of the more obvious proofs of Their station. And because Their foremost task is to explain the essentially unknowable nature of God and spiritual reality in terms of physical experience that we humans can most readily comprehend, it is understandable that these perfect Teachers employ various forms of poetic expression in Their discourse. For at the heart of poetry is the translation of the ineffable into sensually perceptible forms and the explanation of the unknown into terms of that which is known.

When speaking of the poetic nature of the verses that constitute Sacred Scripture, we might most immediately think of the Psalms of David, the parables of Christ, the eloquent *Súrih* of the *Qur’án*, the beauteous prayers of the Báb, or the imagistic Persian Hidden Words of Bahá’u’lláh. Another indication of the poetic nature of these works is that in the case of all five of these Abrahamic religions,

it is common practice for scripture to be set to music, whether they are Jewish prayers intoned by a Cantor in the synagogue, the Gregorian chant of a choir reciting the Christian liturgy, the voice of the muezzin who melodically calls the faithful to prayer from atop the minaret of a mosque, or, in the case of the Bábí and Bahá’í Faiths, the harmonious intoning of prayers by individuals in the privacy of their chambers or assembled in the *Mashriqu’l-Adhkár* (House of Worship).

In sum, the revealed verses and sacred text of every religion are not only replete with poetic imagery and phrasing, but almost inevitably they are celebrated aloud in some pleasing aural form. Poetry is at the heart of these songs, evoking the emotions that characterize spiritual enlightenment, the praise of God, or the longing for nearness and assistance. For example, the melodious recitation of the names of God (His attributes and powers), as in the long healing prayer—perhaps the simplest form of worship and praise—artfully employs the human voice to implore divine assistance from the celestial realm:

He is the Healer, the Sufficer, the Helper, the All-Forgiving, the All-Merciful.

I call on Thee O Exalted One,
O Faithful One, O Glorious One!
Thou the Sufficing, Thou the Healing,
Thou the Abiding, O Thou Abiding One!

I call on Thee O Sovereign, O Upraiser, O Judge! Thou the Sufficing, Thou the Healing, Thou the Abiding, O Thou Abiding One!

I call on Thee O Peerless One, O Eternal One, O Single One! Thou the Sufficing, Thou the Healing, Thou the Abiding, O Thou Abiding One!

(Bahá'í Prayers 90)

At least one other point about the relationship between poetry and revelation should be noted prior to a brief exposition about the pieces that comprise this issue of the journal, dedicated as it is to the poetic voice: poetry is the earliest form of literature to emerge in the evolution of every culture. We observe its usage most obviously in the tribal stage of a culture in which epic stories of heroes are chanted around the communal fire, or in the commemoration of special events where poetic songs and recitation may accompany other artistic expressions of virtuous themes, possibly in symbolic dances accompanied by rhythmical instruments that keep time with the metric of the verse.

In the authoritative texts of the Bahá'í Faith, the practice of arts of all kinds is extolled as having the capacity to inform the mind and elevate the spirit. As 'Abdu'l-Bahá observes regarding the influence of something as ephemeral as music, a "wondrously sweet voice" or "a melody played" may be nothing more than "vibrations

in the air which affect the ear's auditory nerve, and these vibrations are but chance phenomena carried along through the air, even so, see how they move the heart. A wondrous melody is wings for the spirit, and maketh the soul to tremble for joy" (*Selections* 146).

Sadly, in contemporary society, poetry seems remote from public interest in the midst of our largely lost sense of the collective self, and this loss, together with all other cultural remnants of shared values, should well be considered as yet another sign of our distance from the necessary integration of all manner of art into the fabric of a healthy and collaborative community life. At the core of this *disintegration* is the *dysfunction* of community itself—the fact that, for the most part, we have forgotten or abandoned the art of living together. Indeed, we have bartered that bounty for the vain illusion of technology-assisted relationships, a sort of virtual communion conducted from within the secluded fortress of our privacy, where art, if it exists at all, functions as décor or is an entertaining distraction, not a source of serious insight or heartfelt inspiration.

In the Bahá'í Faith, however, the reintegration of art into the fabric of our personal and communal lives is at the heart of the global programs instituted in the Five Year Plans of the Universal House of Justice, the Supreme Institution of the Bahá'í Faith. Founded on the premise that meaningful restructuring of the spiritual

fabric of society cannot be legislated but must emanate from the local level where community life is born, the core Bahá'í programs emphasize the integration of artistic expression in devotional gatherings, home visits, and community classes for children, junior youth, and adults. Whether in song or crafts, in dramatic skits or storytelling, artistic expression among participants assumes a central role in helping individuals of all ages comprehend and express spiritual concepts in memorable forms accessible to the senses.

Nowhere is this emphasis on the arts in community collaboration and enlightenment more emphatically set forth than in the final part of Book 7 in the Ruhi sequence of study circle courses. The overall purpose of the study circle associated with this book, *Walking Together on a Path of Service*, is to train those who wish to become tutors for these courses, all of which are strategically aimed at community building. Aside from the general idea of encouraging tutors to incorporate the arts in all aspects of each course, this section of Book 7 introduces the relevance of the arts to learning in general, and in particular to learning about putting spiritual concepts into action. The section begins with the following prefatory statement:

The aim of this third unit is to reflect with you on another fundamental idea, namely that you can make a significant contribution to the capabilities of service of

those who take part in a study circle by encouraging them to develop their capacity for artistic expression, be it through music, poetry, painting, drama, or any of the various types of crafts. To this end, we will urge you to include artistic endeavors in the activity of every study circle. You should not think of this as entertainment or as an extracurricular activity . . . , but as an essential element enhancing the spiritual development of the participants. (*Walking Together on a Path of Service* 111)

That art should be viewed as integral to matters of the heart and spirit is obviously not new—we immediately associate some of the most inspiring and inspired edifices, symphonies, paintings, sculptures, and performing arts with the commemoration of events in religious history or expression of sacred beliefs. What distinguishes this approach to the arts in relation to integrating spiritual concepts into community life is that the practice of art is not relegated solely to a discrete coterie of artists or artisans who fashion stain glass windows for cathedrals, mosaic designs for the mosque, or choral masterpieces to celebrate the liturgical calendar. Rather, the practice of art is perceived as a spiritualizing force that enables each individual to discover some means by which core beliefs, social principles, and personal virtues can be translated into concrete expression which will subsequently

serve to recall the joy in the communal experience of learning, whether in poetry, song, dance, or crafts. Each person learns firsthand the value of accomplishing in miniature what the Creator has accomplished with the infinite form of the universe—the joy of translating love and unity into diverse expressions of otherwise ineffable delight.

POETIC VOICES AND DISCOURSE

In the context of this enduring relationship between the revealed word and the power of poetry as an essential tool of enlightenment, this issue employs several different literary modes to examine the relationship. We begin with an autobiographical narrative by our newly appointed poetry editor for the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies*, Peter Murphy, about the transformative power of poetry, how the love of poetry instigates a life-saving connection to the revealed word of Bahá'u'lláh. Following this piece is a poem by Tami Haaland, “Flight of the Paper Cranes,” an allusion to the story of Sadako Sasaki, a victim of the bombing of Hiroshima, and then a short essay by esteemed scholar and writer, Suheil Bushrui, about how the vision of the unity of religions influenced Lebanese poet Ameen Rihani.

Next is “The Silences of God,” a wonderfully moving meditation by highly regarded novelist Bahiyyih Nakhjavani. The final pieces consist

first of a most revealing interview from 1975 between Douglas Ruhe and Robert E. Hayden, the first African American to be named Poet Laureate of the United States. In this dialogue, Hayden reveals a great deal about his view of the value of poetry in relation to spirituality and the idea that, in reality, the Manifestations are themselves poets.

The issue concludes with a poem, “The Ideal Person,” by Stephen Dunn, a Pulitzer Prize winner for his 2001 volume *Different Hours*; the English translation of Shapour Rassekh’s 2012 Hasan M. Balyuzi Lecture, “Abdu'l-Bahá, the Standard Bearer of a New Civilization,” the original French version of which appeared in volume 23, number 1/4; and, finally, Louise Prefeit-LeBlanc’s review of *Return to Tyendinaga: The Story of Jim and Melba Loft, Bahá'í Pioneers* by Evelyn Loft-Watts and Patricia Verge

Altogether, this issue should provide the reader with a rich and joyous feast, highlighted by the wonderfully powerful cover art, “The Cleaving,” by painter and former member of the Universal House of Justice member, Hooper Dunbar, a piece that is a poem in its own right. Indeed, it is hard to imagine that the reader will come away without having gained a broader perspective about poetry—and art in general—as inseparable from understanding and expressing the spiritual experience.