

From the Editor's Desk

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This issue of the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the power of words. Each of us can find ample evidence from our own experience that speech, “this activity which so distinguishes human beings from other forms of life” (Universal House of Justice), has power—to persuade and inspire, instruct and illuminate, fragment and wound. In the religious context, of course, words take on a particular significance. The Bahá'í Faith, like many of the revelations whose work it continues, is centered on the Revealed Word, the tangible expression in letters and phrases, “syllables and sounds” (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 71), of that ineffable spiritual reality that is the Word of God—“God’s all-pervasive grace, from which all grace doth emanate” (Bahá’u’lláh, *Tablets* 141).

If the Manifestations’ use of the Word as Their chosen metaphor to help us understand how the divine interacts with creation were not enough to impress upon us the importance of words, we have explicit statements from Bahá’u’lláh on the subject: “Through the power of thine utterance,” He tells us, “subdue the hearts of men” (*Tablets* 84). “Open, O people, the city of the human heart with the key of your utterance” (*Gleanings* 304).

Bahá’í history provides ample proof of the power of words over that most precious of created things, the human heart. All of the achievements of the Bahá’í community since its inception flow, in the final analysis, out of the stream of divine utterance pouring from the Manifestations themselves, a stream that waters the lives—and deeds—of teachers, martyrs, pilgrims and seekers. While the words of the Manifestation are, of course, incomparable, the story of the Bahá’í Faith cannot be understood without also considering the speech and writings of those whom Bahá’u’lláh invested with the authority of the Covenant.

Ann Boyles’ “The Epistolary Style of Shoghi Effendi,” first published in the 1993 volume *The Vision of Shoghi Effendi*, explores the sources of inspiration for the Guardian’s masterful English language writings. This is a particularly apt time to revisit the career, life, and achievements of Shoghi Effendi; having recently commemorated the centenary of the ascension of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, we also mark a hundred years since the inception of the Guardianship, and further pieces from *Vision* may be published in subsequent issues. In this piece, we are shown how the master craftsman chose his materials from amongst the finest available models of English prose writing, and then honed and refined them to his great purpose: the galvanization of a world community into actions unprecedented in the history of organized religion, including the construction from the grassroots of a system of self-administration capable

of channeling the divine confirmation that flows from adhering to the Manifestation's design. In his words to the Bahá'ís of the world, the Guardian held up a mirror to their efforts, one that not only brought accomplishments, past and present, into focus, but inspired with a vision of what could follow, and what the far future would hold.

June Thomas' "Reconsidering the Civil Rights Era in the Footsteps of 'Abdu'l-Bahá'" similarly highlights the extraordinary power and perceptiveness of the words of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, in particular those spoken to audiences in America. This piece also, however, illustrates how the words of ordinary people can be used to extraordinary effect. Drawing on the example of her own grandfather, a Christian minister whose sermons were "not so much spoken as sung" in "a style only truly gifted Southern Black preachers mastered," Thomas shows how words can sustain a community, particularly when reflected in, and amplified through, deeds of loving service. Yet her work also shows us how the power of words can be misused: she highlights the pain of uncovering racist writings during archival research, in which echoes of hatred and disunity from those long gone can still be heard. "For the tongue is a smoldering fire," as Bahá'u'lláh warns us, "and excess of speech a deadly poison. Material fire consumeth the body, whereas the fire of the tongue devoureth both heart and soul. The force of the former lasteth but for a time, whilst the effects of the latter endure a century" (*Kitáb-i-Iqán* 193).

Lev Rickard's "New Knowledge from Old: Conceptions of the Library in the Writings of Shoghi Effendi" gives us a further reflection on this theme of the potential permanence of words. Our ability to preserve our words, reflected in the institution of the library, is one of our greatest strengths as a species; whether in oral tradition, stone engraving, printed book or digital encoding, our thoughts can travel further than our feet, and long outlive our tongues. What, then, is the role of the library in light of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh? Is the library to preserve indiscriminately all words? The words of those with the power to secure their permanence? Or should it look to carry the best of our words forward? This piece is an excellent resource for anyone trying to think about these questions, and correlate the Revelation to this important area that impacts the generation, dissemination, and application of knowledge that are at the heart of all efforts of the Bahá'í community.

As we read these pieces, we can reflect on our own words, and the responsibility that the power of speech and writing entails. "Indeed through the power of good words, the righteous have always succeeded in winning command over the meads of the hearts of men" (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 85). In particular, what deeds might our words inspire, in ourselves and others?

It behooveth the people of Bahá to render the Lord victorious through the power of their utterance and to admonish the people

by their goodly deeds and character, inasmuch as deeds exert greater influence than words. (Bahá'u'lláh, *Tablets* 57)

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