

# ART WHICH NURTURES THE SPIRIT

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I am deeply grateful to the Association of Bahá'í Studies of Japan for inviting us into this wonderful conference concerning "The role of Art in Spiritual Development". For this occasion, I have been asked to convey to you the greetings of the National Spiritual Assembly.

Now, since holding your first ABS conference in 1991, already you are celebrating your 12th year, and during this time, you have been able to bring forth and deliver the results of many outstanding research endeavors carried out by the diligent and earnest members of your Association, under the able leadership of your Executive Board of Directors. This momentum has enriched our community and the NSA is grateful for these achievements.

The National Assembly also wishes to extend congratulations on the quality of your achievements having won the admiration of the Universal House of Justice, as evidenced by their mention in a recent Ridván message.

Now, again today, we look forward to the presentation of many new studies under this year's theme "The role of Art in Spiritual Development". In this regard, and for this occasion, the National Assembly wishes me to share with you some quotations from the Holy Writings.

## ART

According to 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

"All Art is a gift of the Holy Spirit. When this light shines through the mind of a musician, it manifests itself in beautiful harmonies. Again, shining through the mind of a poet, it is seen in fine poetry and poetic prose. When the Light of the Sun of Truth inspires the mind of a painter, he produces marvelous pictures. These gifts are fulfilling their highest purpose, when showing forth the praise of God."<sup>1</sup>

"All things are beneficial if joined with the love of God; and without His love all things are harmful.... For example, a melody, sweet to the ear, bringeth the very spirit of life to a heart in love with God, yet staineth with lust a soul engrossed in sensual desires. And every branch of learning, conjoined with the love of God, is approved and worthy of praise; but bereft of His love, learning is barren – indeed, it bringeth on madness. ...if the fruit of it be the love of God, then is it a blessed tree...."<sup>2</sup>

The origin of Art is the human heart and, according to Bahá'u'lláh, "That which He hath reserved for Himself are the cities of men's hearts...."<sup>3</sup> Please note, He says, "the cities of men's hearts".

Bahá'u'lláh continues, "Thy heart is my home; sanctify it for My descent. Thy spirit is My place of revelation; cleanse it for My manifestation."<sup>4</sup> Therefore, when the soul feels the presence of God, the human heart experiences its highest inspiration. Through the help of the Holy Spirit this inspiration is expressed as new Art. The process is well illustrated by the melodies that flashed through the minds of Beethoven and Mozart, and the energy that guided the brushes of van Gogh and Picasso.

According to the Holy Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, "It is natural for the heart and spirit to take pleasure and enjoyment in all things that show forth symmetry, harmony, and perfection. For instance: a beautiful house, a well designed garden, a graceful action, a well-written book, pleasing garments – in fact, all things that have in themselves grace or beauty are pleasing to the heart and spirit...."<sup>5</sup> Attraction to beauty is one of the forces that lifts the human soul to a higher realm of existence. It is this force that compels us to seek harmony in our daily

lives. The human heart always seeks for harmony – harmony with God, harmony with other human spirits, harmony with society. When the soul acquires harmony, it advances nearer to God.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá once said “From the spiritual world, only joy is given. All sadness and grief come from the material world.”<sup>6</sup>

He also said, “...the Beauty of the True one... its splendor perisheth not and its glory lasteth forever... its attraction [is] infinite. Well is it then with that countenance that reflecteth the splendor of the Light of the Beloved One!”<sup>7</sup> And again, “Without the light, the lamp or candle is not illuminating.”<sup>8</sup>

Bahá’u’lláh states in *The Hidden Words*, “Abandon not the everlasting beauty for a beauty that must die, and set not your affections on this mortal world of dust,”<sup>9</sup> and He stressed the importance of detachment if we are to pursue beauty.

## MUSIC

“...music, sung or played, is spiritual food for soul and heart.”<sup>10</sup>

“Singing melodies will bring animation and happiness to the world of humanity... But this gladness, this sense of emotion is transitory and will be forgotten within a short time. However, [if it be] blended... with the melodies of the Kingdom, [it] wilt impart solace to the world of the spirit and wilt everlastingly stimulate spiritual feelings.”<sup>11</sup>

Can any kind of music be food for the soul? How about rock and heavy metal music? Bahá’u’lláh warns us, “...lest listening thereto should cause you to overstep the bounds of propriety and dignity.” According to reports, when Madonna was at the peak of popularity, unmarried motherhood greatly increased, as did moral decay among teenagers of the United States. On the other hand, there are Bahá’í musicians who have succeeded in creating a good social influence by infusing their songs with excerpts and inspiration from the Writings. With gratitude, we easily recall the well known *Seals and Crofts*. Bahá’u’lláh also warns, “We, verily, have made music as a ladder for your souls, a means whereby they may be lifted up unto the realm on high; make it not, therefore, as wings to self and passion.”<sup>12</sup>

“...although music is a material affair, yet its tremendous effect is spiritual, and its greatest attachment is to the realm of the spirit.” The Grecians, we know, generally played music before a lecture. And, taking the Persian musician Barbod as an example, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains the great power of influence that Barbod’s music had over the king – to such an extent that after listening to Barbod’s music the king would give way to feelings of generosity that had swelled up in his heart.<sup>13</sup>

‘Abdu’l-Bahá also states that “Music is an important means to the education and development of humanity, but the only true way is through the Teachings of God. Music is like... this pure chalice... and the Teachings of God... are the water of life.”<sup>14</sup>

“When the Teachings of God, whether they be in the form of anthems or communes or prayers, when they are melodiously sung, are most impressive.”<sup>14</sup>

You must have many experiences when, for example, the chanting of a Persian prayer has moved and inspired your heart. Taking music into the prayer meeting, the Feast, study circle, and children’s class can lift our spirits, fill our hearts, and create desirable attitudes.

When music is used for teaching, in the form of singing and performing, it will open the door of the heart and encourage the soul. The word of God will travel faster, directly to the heart by using passages of spiritual emotion.

## **STORY-TELLING AND PICTURE THEATER**

To nurture one's story-telling ability is important for a Bahá'í. Episodes taken from the early history of the Faith must be conveyed. The Guardian has referred to The Dawn-Breakers as "a source of inspiration in all literary and artistic pursuits".<sup>15</sup> This book of history, that we cannot read without tears, is the "chief instrument wherewith [we] can feed the flame of enthusiasm that glows in every Bahá'í heart...."<sup>16</sup> Drawing upon these stories will support the faith of following generations and become the base of art for world civilization.

"The story causes the meditation and inspires and incites one to action."<sup>17</sup>

## **DRAMA**

The World Center had a drama club. Interested staff, which included youth, practiced in their spare time and performed monthly or bi-monthly. The content of these miniature dramas often highlighted the early, little known believers who held their faith staunchly and gave their life to the Cause. The personal experience of viewing a drama, in contrast to reading from a book, creates in front of us a living visual perception and, within the heart, a more vivid emotional connection to the age being portrayed – often the days when the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh were still alive – as though we were actually living in that time. We experience deep sentiments and are moved by the dedication of the early believer, his firm resolve and his earnest love of God, and often at those moments we renew our own personal vow to the higher service of humanity.

## **CONCLUSION**

In everything, when one is first to receive a blessing, he is expected to share it with others. God did not give us so many blessings for just our own pleasure and enjoyment. In the same way, those who are early to accept the faith of God, are entrusted with a mission. Bahá'u'lláh knows that we have hearts of deep consideration and the capacity to care for the spiritual welfare of others and that we will share His mission of rescuing the population on earth.

The nature of the human is to give ceaselessly, to give of one's possessions, of time, energy, and knowledge just as the nature of the candle is to give forth its flame of light and heat, reducing its own self. When we try to deliver the great love of Bahá'u'lláh, which intends to rescue, without exception, all humankind, we will find that art can help us to reach the untold numbers of masses. Art will reach directly into the heart and become the key to opening hearts.

I would like to close with the story of one youth who I met at the World Center while I served in the International Teaching Centre. This youth was praying at the Holy Shrine, longing to serve Bahá'u'lláh before he returned to his own country for university studies. The only thing he possessed was an earnest love of Bahá'u'lláh, a small traveling fee, the ability to dance, and the friends he acquired while on a Youth Year of Service at the World Centre. He went to Africa where he knew a few friends. Then he went around the villages to teach the Faith... but no one would listen. He was discouraged. Then he turned to 'Abdu'l-Bahá and besought His assistance, an idea came to him. He gathered the African youth, taught them His Bahá'í dances, learned from them their native dances and songs, and then he went to the villages and beat the drums at the village entrance. When all the villagers gathered, he and the African youth taught the Faith through dance. The villagers watched him with tears in their eyes, and soon they started to join the Faith in groups. According to the report, during the 3 weeks this 18 year-old youth was in Africa, 197 people became Bahá'í.

Today, I have drawn quotations from the Holy writings on art and music and shared some examples regarding story-telling and drama. I am grateful if this information can be of use to

you. Thank you for listening.

## Notes

1. 'Abdu'l-Baha in (comp.), *The Importance of the Arts in Promoting the Faith*, no.23, p.10-11.
2. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha*, no.154, p.190.
3. *Gleanings*, no.115, p.241-242.
4. *The Hidden Words*, Arabic #59.
5. 'Abdu'l-Baha in (comp.), *The Importance of the Arts in Promoting the Faith*", no.24, p.11.
6. *Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha*.
7. Ibid. no.175, p.213-214.
8. *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p.205.
9. *The Hidden Words*, Persian #14.
10. 'Abdu'l-Baha in (comp.), "*Extracts from the Baha'i Writings on Music*", vol.2, p.79.
11. 'Abdu'l-Baha in (comp.), "*The Importance of the Arts in Promoting the Faith*", no.10, p.6.
12. *The Kitab-i-Aqdas*, p.39.
13. 'Abdu'l-Baha in (comp.), "*Extracts from the Baha'i Writings on Music*", vol.2, p.77.
14. Ibid. p.77.
15. Shoghi Effendi, 21 June 1932 cable, *Messages to America*, p.1.
16. Shoghi Effendi, 17 November 1932, Postscript of an unpublished letter to an individual.
17. UHJ *Ridvan Message 1996*.