

# Emblems of Faithfulness: *Pluralism in Meaning and Beauty in the Ordinary*<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*Memorials of the Faithful* is a book consisting of stories told by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to gatherings of Bahá’ís in Haifa during World War I. This essay aims to explore some of the insights contained within it. The focus is on two readily apparent aspects of the text. First is the diversity of personalities described, while the other is the sheer ordinariness of many of those remembered

<sup>1</sup> A version of this essay was originally presented at the 36th Annual Conference of the Association for Bahá’í Studies in Montreal, Quebec, in August 2012. Part of that presentation included five short films based on stories from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s *Memorials of the Faithful*, prepared by youth and junior youth in a number of communities across Canada. The films are available online: *Ustád Isma’íl, The Builder Cavemant* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1rlt-gzOaNIw>); *Muhammad Alí-i-Isfaháni, The Mystic Businessman* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lJy0ysy86fo>); *Shaykh Salmán, The Courier* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hR890Enf7p4>); *Áqá Mirzá Mahmúd and Áqá Ridá, The Dishwashers* ([http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_g71Z4duUJw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_g71Z4duUJw)); *Táhirih* (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5JtaVk9BEOo>).

lives. The discussion explores how these two aspects of the text highlight some of the broader questions raised by the Bahá’í Faith.

## Resumé

*Memorials of the Faithful* (*Mémorial des Fidèles*) est un recueil d’anecdotes racontées par ‘Abdu’l-Bahá dans les rassemblements de bahá’ís à Haifa au cours de la Première Guerre mondiale. Le présent essai explore certains des enseignements qui y sont contenus. L’accent est mis sur deux aspects très évidents du texte. Le premier est la diversité des personnalités qui y sont décrites et l’autre, la simplicité même de la vie de ceux dont ‘Abdu’l-Bahá évoquait le souvenir. L’auteur explore ici comment ces deux aspects du texte font ressortir certaines des grandes questions soulevées par la foi bahá’íe.

## Resumen

*Memorials of the Faithful* (*A Los Que Fueron Fieles*) es una colección de anécdotas contadas por ‘Abdu’l-Bahá en las reuniones de los bahá’ís en Haifa durante la Primera Guerra Mundial. El presente ensayo tiene como objetivo explorar algunas de las ideas contenidas en este libro. El enfoque se centra en dos aspectos muy evidentes del texto. El primero es la diversidad de personalidades descritas, mientras que el otro es la normalidad de muchas de esas vidas recordadas. La discusión explora cómo estos dos aspectos en el texto destacan algunas de las cuestiones más amplias planteadas por la Fe Bahá’í.

## INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is an ancient method of consciousness raising and meaning making.<sup>2</sup> It is intuitive and widespread

<sup>2</sup> The workings of storytelling are

across cultures.<sup>3</sup> On a symbolic level, stories capture the conventional and reveal the possible. A story can help us notice what has been taken for granted and can give meaning to the commonplace. Yet it can also help us imagine what might otherwise be formless or imperceptible, and express our dreams and aspirations by creating archetypes that inspire and influence.

Our ability to tell stories is central to the construction of our sense of self.<sup>4</sup> At the collective level, the sharing of stories also creates an “interpretive community” that shapes our cultural life and identity. It has been said that stories are “a culture’s coin and currency” (Bruner 15). As the

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explored by Jerome Bruner in *Making Stories, Law, Literature, Life*. He points to findings of paleoarchaeology and anthropology to suggest the presence of narrative practices even in prehistoric societies (95–99).

<sup>3</sup> As Bruner points out, the delight that children find “in wordless dramas of the unexpected performed for them by adults, like peekaboo,” and the fact that “they do so before they have words enough to tell or understand stories,” suggests “a kind of narrative or theatrical precocity present almost from the start” (31–33).

<sup>4</sup> As Thomas King has stated, “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are”(2). Also, referring to neurological disorders in the form of dysnarrativia, Bruner suggests that “[t]here is now evidence that if we lacked the capacity to make stories about selves, there would be no such thing as selfhood” (85–87).

prototypical experience told by the story gains wider circulation over time, it becomes a “collective coin” that carries meanings that are gradually shared.

Circulating in different corners of the worldwide Bahá'í community is a collection of sixty-nine stories about the lives of more than seventy early followers of the Bábí-Bahá'í Faith, titled *Memorials of the Faithful*. It consists of stories told by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to weekly gatherings of Bahá'ís in Haifa in the latter part of 1915, during World War I. The ravages of war brought fear everywhere. The people of Haifa and its environs were gripped by anxiety and despair. Bahá'ís in the Holy Land were isolated from the rest of the Bahá'í world, as the war interrupted communication channels. Activities of the Faith also came to a relative standstill. It was against this gloomy backdrop of the war that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá encouraged the Bahá'ís around Him by speaking to them about the stirring stories of the early faithful (Balyuzi 410–30, Banani 73). *Memorials of the Faithful* captures those moments of storytelling shared by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá with the Bahá'ís during the war years.

The stories are characterized by a variety of archetypes that are destined to inspire generations of Bahá'ís to come, and illustrate through living examples many core tenets of the Bahá'í Faith. The book shares the same literary category as *Some Answered Questions* in that both works are transcriptions of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talks, which He later examined and approved for publication.

However, like a precious coin waiting to be rediscovered and put into re-circulation, *Memorials of the Faithful* has, for a variety of reasons, not received the kind of broad attention that its sister book, *Some Answered Questions*, has been given by Western Bahá'ís. One reason might be its relatively brief circulation in the West. While *Some Answered Questions* was published in English in 1907, *Memorials of the Faithful* was translated and published in English only in 1971, although 'Abdu'l-Bahá approved the original text in 1915—the same year in which the talks were given—and the original was published in Persian in 1924 (Banani 73). Another reason might be the foreignness of its style to Western readers. As Amin Banani explains, the text builds on a Persian literary tradition which has a spirit and aesthetic alien to Western sensibilities (73).<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of the lack of attention paid to it so far, *Memorials of the Faithful* is part of the legacy left to us by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. This essay takes a step toward unwrapping this gift and exploring its insights. The focus is on two readily apparent aspects of the text. First is the diversity of personalities described, while the other is the

sheer ordinariness of many of those remembered lives. The discussion explores how these two aspects of the text highlight some of the broader questions raised by the Faith itself.

#### PLURALISM IN MEANING

Readers will find a wide variety of personalities and experiences represented in *Memorials of the Faithful*. There are stories about individuals who served their faith through such simple acts as cooking and cleaning (Áqá Mirzá Mahmúd and Áqá Riḍá in ch. 12); another tells the tale of a courier who for thirty-nine years walked across mountains and valleys in order to deliver messages from the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh to Their respective followers (Shaykh Salmán in ch. 4); yet another describes a mystic who always managed to run a successful side business even while imprisoned (Muhammad-'Alí-i-Isfaháni in ch. 7). Also represented are stories about a calligrapher famed throughout the East (Mishkín-Qalam in ch. 38), a man who helped to erect the first Bahá'í House of Worship (Hají Mirzá Muhammad-Taquí in ch. 47), and a poet (Táhirih in ch. 69), who some suggested to be the first Persian woman “who had considered unveiling on her own initiative” (Amanat 306).

Many more stories are recounted in this book, each representing a life lived within a particular context and a journey on a unique path. Yet, as the title of the book suggests, these distinct lives, despite their diversity,

<sup>5</sup> One example of cultural frame of reference giving rise to an interpretive tension relating to *Memorials of the Faithful* may be found in the exchange between S. E. Morrison and F. Lewis in *Dialogue*. Available at [http://Bahá'í-library.com/morrison\\_art\\_Bahá'í\\_biography](http://Bahá'í-library.com/morrison_art_Bahá'í_biography).

all share the quality of faithfulness defined by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as "conscious knowledge" and "the practice of good deeds" (*Bahá'í World Faith* 383). The stories of these early faithful give flesh and blood to the quality of faithfulness and show us what it might look like on this earthly plane. Referring to the original Persian title of the book, Amin Banani explains,

The root word of *dhikr* in the title means prayerful mention—reverent remembrance. It implies that it is not the biographer nor the reader who memorializes a human life, but rather the quality of that life which has earned immemorial luster and sheds light on all who remember that quality. Quite literally this book is a remembrance of *vafá*—faithfulness—not just memories of individual lives, but remembrance of that essential quality which was the animating force of all those lives. (73)

Each of the stories recounted in *Memorials of the Faithful* thus helps to give tangible meaning to an otherwise abstract notion of faithfulness, and how it was specifically applied.

For those familiar with the life of Táhirih, a brilliant scholar and poet, and one of the earliest followers of the Báb, her faithfulness could never be questioned. In the final story in *Memorials of the Faithful*, 'Abdu'l-Bahá recounts instances when she audaciously challenged divines to debate her and governors to treat her with

respect. He also revisits the story of Táhirih's courage when she removed her veil at Badasht and her conscientious preparation when faced with her own martyrdom.

Although Táhirih is a well-known example of faithfulness and courage in Bahá'í history (Root; J. S. Hatcher), 'Abdu'l-Bahá includes accounts of many other less notable, but no less faithful, believers. In seeming contrast to a life filled with public accomplishments and bravery in the face of extreme cruelty, the story 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells of Hájí 'Abdu'lláh Najaf-Ábádí (ch. 24) seems merely that of an earnest farmer whose life would have been utterly forgotten had he not been memorialized in three succinct paragraphs.

In the first, 'Abdu'l-Bahá confirms that Hájí 'Abdu'lláh was "confident, steadfast and firm; certain of the manifold bounties of God; of an excellent disposition and character." In the second, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains that Hájí 'Abdu'lláh spent time farming, "both tilling the soil and devoting much of his time to supplicating and communing with God." Finally, 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us that Hájí 'Abdu'lláh was "completely detached from all but God, happy in God's grace" and that his "death came at the appointed hour, and in the shadowing care of Bahá'u'lláh"(66-67). It is noteworthy that in this brief story the concept of faithfulness is expressed in a life that is not characterized by tragic or compelling events.

However, even in the face of great

tragedy, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá allows for faithfulness to shine in various responses. The life of Fátimih Begum illuminates the truth that faithfulness can be shown by forbearance in the face of great sorrow. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us that even as a young girl “she was beset with uncounted ordeals” (173). When He tells us that her father “died in a desert caravanserai, died hard—helpless and far from home,” the narrative is devastating. Orphaned, Fátimih Begum was left “in distress, until, by God’s grace, she became the wife of the King of Martyrs.”<sup>6</sup> ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes the turmoil and anguish that this woman, whose husband would eventually become known as the King of Martyrs, was destined to suffer. Filled with both weeping and prayer, the story of her life portrays yet another example of faithfulness, expressed not so much in direct action, but more importantly in the very forbearance she maintained.

The collection as a whole highlights yet more forms that faithfulness may take. Faithfulness is shown to have an open and fluid meaning with practical requirements, which, instead of being formulaic and predictable, vary, depending on the circumstances and the state of development of an individual. In addition to its biographical significance, the book also embodies the principle of unity in diversity, which Shoghi Effendi describes as

representing both the “animating purpose” and the “watchword” of the Bahá’í Faith (*World Order* 42), and which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains in the following analogy:

Consider the flowers of a garden. Though differing in kind, color, form and shape, yet, inasmuch as they are refreshed by the waters of one spring, revived by the breath of one wind, invigorated by the rays of one sun, this diversity increaseth their charm and addeth unto their beauty. How unpleasing to the eye if all the flowers and plants, the leaves and blossoms, the fruit, the branches and the trees of that garden were all of the same shape and color! Diversity of hues, form and shape enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof. In like manner, when divers shades of thought, temperament and character, are brought together under the power and influence of one central agency, the beauty and glory of human perfection will be revealed and made manifest. Naught but the celestial potency of the Word of God, which ruleth and transcendeth the realities of all things, is capable of harmonizing the divergent thoughts, sentiments, ideas and convictions of the children of men. (qtd. in *World Order* 42)

In recognizing the variety of ways in which faithfulness may be manifested,

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6 “The King of Martyrs” refers to Mirza Muhammad-Hasan who was given this title by Bahá’u’lláh after he was martyred. See: *God Passes By*, p. 200-01.

*Memorials of the Faithful* calls attention to the infinite and dynamic nature of spiritual reality, as well as the unending possibilities of its manifestation.

The faithfulness of Shaykh Salmán is embodied in his endurance and his trustworthiness. In recounting this story, 'Abdu'l-Bahá first describes a serendipitous occasion of mistaken identity that prevented Salmán from being arrested as a Bábí. Then 'Abdu'l-Bahá tells us,

When Bahá'u'lláh arrived in 'Iráq, the first messenger to reach His holy presence was Salmán, who then returned with Tablets addressed to the friends in Hindíyán. Once each year this blessed individual would set out on foot to see his Well-Beloved, after which he would retrace his steps, carrying Tablets to many cities, Isfáhán, Shíráz, Káshán, Tihrán, and the rest.

From [1853] until the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh in [1892], Salmán would arrive once a year, bringing letters, leaving with the Tablets, faithfully delivering each one to him for whom it was intended. Every single year throughout that long period, he came on foot from Persia to 'Iráq, or to Adrianople, or to the Most Great Prison at 'Akká; came with the greatest eagerness and love and then went back again.

He had remarkable powers of endurance, He traveled on foot, as a rule eating nothing but onions

and bread; and in all that time, he moved about in such a way that he was never once held up and never once lost a letter or a Tablet. (14–15)

Here we see an example of an unobtrusive courier who is completely different from a figure such as Nabíl-i-Zarandí, the character in another of the unforgettable stories in *Memorials of the Faithful*. 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to Nabíl-i-Zarandí as “the great Nabíl” (32), and Shoghi Effendi has described him as Bahá'u'lláh's “Poet-Laureate, His chronicler and His indefatigable disciple” (*God Passes By* 130). 'Abdu'l-Bahá further states that Nabíl was “a gifted poet, and his tongue most eloquent; a man of mettle, and on fire with passionate love” (33). Sent by Bahá'u'lláh to travel and teach extensively, he “flamed like a torch in every company, he was the star of every assemblage, to all who came he held out the intoxicating cup” (34).

When Bahá'u'lláh was imprisoned in 'Akká and the authorities did not permit Nabíl to enter to see Him, he lived in despair in the cave of Elijah until Bahá'u'lláh's captivity ended, at which time he

hastened to Him with a joyful heart. Then he used himself up like a candle, burning away with the love of God. Day and night he sang praises of the one Beloved of both worlds and of those about His threshold, writing verses in the pentameter and hexameter



forms, composing lyrics and long odes. Almost daily he was admitted to the presence of the Manifestation. (*Memorials*, 34–35)

Tragically, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá confirms that after Bahá’u’lláh’s ascension,

Nabíl was in such anguish that anyone seeing him was bewildered. He struggled on, but the only desire he had was to lay down his life. He could suffer no longer; his longing was aflame in him; he could stand the fiery pain no more. And so he became the king of the cohorts of love, and he rushed into the sea. (35)

The intensity of the story of Nabíl is unforgettable. His illustrious life and his overwhelming desire to join his Beloved in the next world exemplify the more profound aspects of faithfulness described by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. His is an example that only a figure of such heroic proportions would be capable of following.

In other stories, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá allows for the celebration of all who show faithfulness, even those whose poetic accomplishments are limited. One of the more humorous memories is found in the story of Shaykh ‘Alí-Akbar-i-Mázgání, whom ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes as a “chief of free souls” (104) and for whom He asked God to “send down upon his grave, from the Kingdom of His forgiveness, a heavy rain of blessing, bestow a great victory upon him, and grant him mercies,

pressed down and running over, in the retreats of Heaven” (105). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes both the martyrdom of ‘Alí-Akbar’s father and the exile of the son. However, it is ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s comment on his poetic capacity that is most endearing. “When the beauty of the Desired One had vanished from this world, ‘Alí-Akbar remained loyal to the Covenant and prospered under the grace of God. By disposition and because of the intense love in his heart, he yearned to write poetry, to fashion odes and ghazals, but he lacked both meter and rhyme” (105). What a gift to the general reader that in a book which extols many poets, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá distinguishes the requirement to write *good* poetry from the capacity to be a faithful servant of Bahá’u’lláh!

The varied images of faithfulness presented in *Memorials of the Faithful* challenge the reductionist approach to the concept of faith that has persisted in the domain of many religions, an approach that tends to substitute for a complex and dynamic relationship with the divine, simpler proxies, such as adherence to religious doctrines, to traditions or laws, or to the pursuit of emotional ecstasy (W. S. Hatcher 1–35). Such an approach also tends to inhibit a growing consciousness of spiritual truth by insisting on certain understandings of that truth as absolute rather than partial, as final rather than developing. It prefers conformity instead of diversity and privileges answers over questions (Nakhjavani 1–24), the literal over the symbolic (Woodman 75–97; J. S. Hatcher, *The*

*Poetry of Táhirih* 165–231), and ultimately, the finite and material over the infinite and metaphysical.

Bahá'u'lláh, the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, observed the operation of this reductionist tendency in humanity's repeated rejection and oppression of the Prophets of all past ages. In the *Kitáb-i-Iqán*, He writes,

Why is it that the advent of every true Manifestation of God hath been accompanied by such strife and tumult, by such tyranny and upheaval? This notwithstanding the fact that all the Prophets of God, whenever made manifest unto the peoples of the world, have invariably foretold the coming of yet another Prophet after them, and have established such signs as would herald the advent of the future Dispensation. To this the records of all sacred books bear witness. Why then is it that despite the expectation of men in their quest of the Manifestations of Holiness, and in spite of the signs recorded in the sacred books, such acts of violence, of oppression and cruelty, should have been perpetrated in every age and cycle against all the Prophets and chosen Ones of God? Even as He hath revealed: "As oft as an Apostle cometh unto you with that which your souls desire not, ye swell with pride, accusing some of being impostors and slaying others.

Reflect, what could have been

the motive for such deeds? What could have prompted such behaviour towards the Revealers of the beauty of the All-Glorious? ... [S]uch behaviour can be attributed to naught save the petty-mindedness of such souls as tread the valley of arrogance and pride, are lost in the wilds of remoteness, walk in the ways of their idle fancy, and follow the dictates of the leaders of their faith. Their chief concern is mere opposition; their sole desire is to ignore the truth. Unto every discerning observer it is evident and manifest that had these people in the days of each of the Manifestations of the Sun of Truth sanctified their eyes, their ears, and their hearts from whatever they had seen, heard, and felt, they surely would not have been deprived of beholding the beauty of God, nor strayed far from the habitations of glory. But having weighed the testimony of God by the standard of their own knowledge, gleaned from the teachings of the leaders of their faith, and found it at variance with their limited understanding, they arose to perpetrate such unseemly acts. (para. 13–14)

Referring to the plurality of meanings contained in spiritual truths, Bahá'u'lláh alludes to the saying, "Every knowledge hath seventy meanings, of which one only is known amongst the people" (*Kitáb-i-Iqán* para. 283). He further explains that an essential



purpose of progressive revelation is to inculcate a consciousness of the infinite meanings of spiritual truths and the never-ending process of their unveiling.

In order to achieve such a heightened state of spiritual awareness, however, an individual must “cleanse” his heart from selfish desires and motives. As Bahá’u’lláh explains,

When the channel of the human soul is cleansed of all worldly and impeding attachments, it will unfailingly perceive the breath of the Beloved across immeasurable distances, and will, led by its perfume, attain and enter the City of Certitude. Therein he will discern the wonders of His ancient wisdom, and will perceive all the hidden teachings from the rustling leaves of the Tree—which flourisheth in that City. With both his inner and his outer ear he will hear from its dust the hymns of glory and praise ascending unto the Lord of Lords, and with his inner eye will he discover the mysteries of “return” and “revival.” (*Kitáb-i-Iqán* para. 217)

They that valiantly labour in quest of God’s will, when once they have renounced all else but Him, will be so attached and wedded to that City that a moment’s separation from it would to them be unthinkable. (para. 218)

That city is none other than the

Word of God revealed in every age and dispensation. In the days of Moses it was the Pentateuch; in the days of Jesus the Gospel; in the days of Muhammad the Messenger of God the Qur’án; in this day the Bayán; and in the dispensation of Him Whom God will make manifest His own Book—the Book unto which all the Books of former Dispensations must needs be referred, the Book which standeth amongst them all transcendent and supreme. In these cities spiritual sustenance is bountifully provided, and incorruptible delights have been ordained. The food they bestow is the bread of heaven, and the Spirit they impart is God’s imperishable blessing. Upon detached souls they bestow the gift of Unity, enrich the destitute, and offer the cup of knowledge unto them who wander in the wilderness of ignorance. All the guidance, the blessings, the learning, the understanding, the faith, and certitude, conferred upon all that is in heaven and on earth, are hidden and treasured within these Cities. (para. 219)

Clearly this journey toward the City of Certitude was shared by all those commemorated in *Memorials of the Faithful*. Although each of these souls may have taken his or her own path to attain that City, the journeys they undertook all entail passage through the same stages of ascent that Bahá’u’lláh portrays in *The Seven Valleys*.

Furthermore, each among these “faithful” was distinguished by a pure heart and complete reliance on God. Indeed, their shared love for the Manifestation unifies and overshadows their otherwise distinct lives.

#### BEAUTY IN THE ORDINARY

Related to the pluralism displayed in *Memorials of the Faithful* is another remarkable feature of the book, namely the ordinary nature of so many of the lives described. On page after page, the book recounts the stories of simple folk who, in the words of the translator, are “so humble that the passing years would surely have refused [them] a history” (*Memorials* xii).

Included are a tailor, a gardener, dishwashers, a jeweler, a widowed housewife, and many others. Yet, their actions, whether in the form of tireless service, steadfast loyalty, radiant acquiescence, or simply silent self-effacement, were recognized by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as no less significant than the heroic sacrifices and legendary deeds that characterized some of those whom historians might regard as more noteworthy or of grander proportions.

This remembrance of the power in the ordinary life and the recognition of the beauty of the simple but faithful soul stands in marked contrast with the book’s hagiographic literary form, traditionally reserved for the depiction of saints and heroes. As Banani observes, the book is built upon a long Islamic tradition

of hagiography, exemplified by such works as twelfth-century mystic poet ‘Attár’s *Tadhkiratu’l-Awliyá* (Remembrance of Saints), which recounts the lives of seventy-two famous Sufi saints (73). But this literary practice of remembering the lives of saints and heroes extends beyond Islam and is found in other religious traditions. As Graham Hassall notes,

Traditions of biography and autobiography have evolved in each of the world religions. Devoted at first to depicting the life of the prophet, and the lives of the first disciples, they have expanded to include accounts of martyrs, saints, and holy men and women. The *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* defines this literature as “Hagiology”—“literature that treats of the lives and legends of saints.” (70)

By including the stories of simple, ordinary people in this collection, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has implicitly broadened the meaning of saintliness and heroism to include sacrificial choices made by ordinary people in the course of their daily lives. Echoing this point, Hassall observes that “the intention of a work such as *Memorials of the Faithful* is to depict ‘ordinary’ people who, through their faith, do extraordinary things. Such stories inspire because they show the effect of faith on ordinary people” (72).

In remembering simple acts of faith that might otherwise go unnoticed,

the stories in *Memorials of the Faithful* pave the way for developing an ethic of biographical practice in Bahá'í discourse, which, according to Hassall, is characterized by “the diversity of personalities depicted” (72) and “the project of finding heroic acts in the ordinary and everyday, of observing the saintly in the common believer” (81).

For example, in the stories of Áqá Mírzá Mahmúd and Áqá Ridá, faithfulness is expressed through the mundane tasks of cooking and washing dishes. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá describes these two men as “the very essence of God’s Love, utterly detached from all but God” (40). In Baghdad they lived together with five other believers in one small house. They were all so poor that sometimes they could only afford a few dates to share for their dinner, but they were serving Bahá’u’lláh and thus were blissfully happy, often chanting prayers all night long. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us that

[w]hen the retinue of Bahá’u’lláh left Baghdád for Constantinople, He was accompanied by a great crowd of people. Along the way, they met with famine conditions. These two souls strode along on foot, ahead of the howdah in which Bahá’u’lláh was riding, and covered a distance of seven or eight farsakhs every day. Way-worn and faint, they would reach the halting-place; and yet, weary as they were, they would immediately set about preparing and

cooking the food, and seeing to the comfort of the believers. The efforts they made were truly more than flesh can bear. There were times when they had not more than two or three hours sleep out of the twenty-four; because, once the friends had eaten their meal, these two would be busy collecting and washing up the dishes and cooking utensils; this would take them till midnight, and then only then would they rest. At daybreak they would rise, pack everything, and set out again. (39)

Another faithful individual chosen to be portrayed by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is Muhammad-‘Alí-i-Isfáhání: “Noble, high-minded, he was one of Isfáhán’s most respected citizens, and served as a host and sanctuary for every stranger, rich or poor. He had verve, an excellent disposition, was forbearing, affable, generous, a boon companion; and it was known throughout the city that he enjoyed a good time” (24). According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, it seems that, even when traveling with Bahá’u’lláh to Constantinople, Adrianople, and on to the prison city of Akká, Muhammad-‘Alí not only maintained his congenial disposition, he also “would carry on some business which, however trifling, would bring in surprisingly abundant returns” (24). So it was that this man’s faithfulness was not expressed in response to great suffering and deprivation. Rather, he dined on delicious food and lived in a lovely home even as a prisoner because “for

him the days passed in indescribable delight" (25).

By comparison, Ustád Ismá'íl—who also was a successful man, a prosperous builder—was destined to sacrifice all his comfort and wealth, and even his beloved bride, to follow Bahá'u'lláh. Late in life, he traveled on foot, without provisions, to arrive at the Most Great Prison to see Bahá'u'lláh. He then lived in material poverty in a cave nearby and yet was ever thankful for his bounties. Accordingly, both these men, so distinct in their individual circumstances, continually thanked Bahá'u'lláh for the many blessings in their lives.

The elevation of these seemingly ordinary lives finds a parallel in Shoghi Effendi's call to the North American Bahá'ís to be "living martyrs," believers who sacrifice not by shedding their blood but through constancy and perseverance in their everyday choices and actions:

The community of the organized promoters of the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh in the American continent—the spiritual descendants of the dawn-breakers of an heroic Age, who by their death proclaimed the birth of that Faith—must, in turn, usher in, not by their death but through living sacrifice, that promised World Order, the shell ordained to enshrine that priceless jewel, the world civilization, of which the Faith itself is the sole begetter. (*Advent* 7)

As William Hatcher explains, the devaluation of the ordinary is symptomatic of a broader perversion caused by materialistic conceptions of life. He refers to the diminution of the role of mothers in a highly individualistic society as one powerful example of this tendency:

Consider, for example, the individualistic societies of North America and Western Europe, which give extremely high value to successful athletes and cinema actors, who are paid enormous sums of money to display their particular abilities and talents. Contrast this with the generally low value these same societies give to motherhood, which is devalued because it is "ordinary": supposedly "anyone" can be a mother; it takes no special ability.

However, when viewed from the spiritual perspective of authentic morality, motherhood is the primary and most valuable role in society. Indeed, we can observe that even "ordinary" mothers give priority to the needs of their children over their own needs at virtually every instant from the birth of a child until it becomes an autonomous adult. Not only is this "common" degree of self-sacrifice an extraordinary phenomenon, it is the very foundation of society. If only one generation of women refused to play this role it would be the end of the human race.

Yet, our individualistic Western societies take the self-sacrifice of mothers for granted while laying immense social energy and resources at the feet of professional athletes and rock musicians, who perform no vital social function whatsoever. Indeed, the complete disappearance of these latter roles from society would be of little significance to the progress of humanity. (31)

As this example illustrates, the spiritual dimension of life is rendered invisible when viewed from a purely materialistic frame of reference. The beauty and meaning reflected in the ordinary sacrifices that people make is lost when viewed by the eye lacking in spiritual perception. In order to perceive the beauty in the ordinary, one must employ the “inner eye” and assess value according to spiritual metrics.

Indeed, the discounting of the ordinary has often been used as part of an argument by established orthodoxies to reject the appearance of a new revelation. As Bahá'u'lláh writes in the *Kitáb-i-Íqán*,

Amongst the proofs demonstrating the truth of this Revelation is this, that in every age and Dispensation, whenever the invisible Essence was revealed in the person of His Manifestation, certain souls, obscure and detached from all worldly entanglements, would seek illumination from the Sun of Prophethood and Moon of divine

guidance, and would attain unto the divine Presence. For this reason, the divines of the age and those possessed of wealth, would scorn and scoff at these people. Even as He hath revealed concerning them that erred: “Then said the chiefs of His people who believed not, ‘We see in Thee but a man like ourselves; and we see not any who have followed Thee except our meanest ones of hasty judgment, nor see we any excellence in you above ourselves: nay, we deem you liars.’” They caviled at those holy Manifestations, and protested saying: “None hath followed you except the abject amongst us, those who are worthy of no attention.” Their aim was to show that no one amongst the learned, the wealthy, and the renowned believed in them. By this and similar proofs they sought to demonstrate the falsity of Him that speaketh naught but the truth. (para. 246)

Hence, Bahá'u'lláh alerts us to the fact that early disciples of all religions had always met with disdain because of their often lowly or insignificant social status. However, He explains that the very fact that these early disciples were of humble origin resulted from their having “renounced their substance,” “laid down their lives for their Well-Beloved, and surrendered their all in His path” (para. 251). Indeed, this spirit of detachment testifies to the power of their faith.

The beauty that 'Abdu'l-Bahá witnessed in the sacrifices made by those who may appear as ordinary or insignificant when seen through eyes deprived of spiritual vision, points to a broader understanding about the potential nobility of each and every human being, whatever their status in society. As Bahá'u'lláh writes, "O Son of Spirit! Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created" (Arabic Hidden Words no. 22). Expressions of human nobility may be found in all forms of self-sacrificial acts, whether large or small, extraordinary or ordinary, rare or constant. In fact, it is only when acts of selflessness become more "common" that they become a type of collective norm, a foundation upon which a just and equitable society can be built.<sup>7</sup> This

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<sup>7</sup> An insight related to this comes from the field of law, where there is a growing desire to look to the domain of the everyday life of ordinary citizens when exploring questions of social justice and the possibilities for structural reform. For instance, the founding president of the Law Commission of Canada has engaged the question of law reform in the "lessons of everyday law," and has appealed to legislators, policy makers, and ordinary folk alike to see the operation of justice not only in the formal legal arena, but also in citizens' daily interactions with each other, with groups in society, and with the state. This inquiry into the lessons of everyday law is a way of highlighting the transformative potential of small, ordinary, or seemingly

vision of human nobility calls for a heightened awareness of the power of human agency, of the inner strengths and potential available to every human being. It likewise can restore in us a sense of hope and purpose and can serve to inspire and mobilize us into ordinary yet ennobling actions in the form of daily practice of good deeds.

Furthermore, this vision of human nobility provides a foundation for the principle of social equality. People are equal because they are all created with the potential to be noble. Each is endowed with a capacity to know, to love, to will. These inherent human capacities are generative and creative and are essential sources of social progress. Equally important, however, is the fact that this vision of human nobility also gives rise to a duty on the part of the individual to participate in the forward progress of society.

This drive to participate, to act and to work, is suggested in the Bahá'í Writings as part of the fabric of human reality. In the words of Bahá'u'lláh, "O Son of Man! I loved thy creation, hence I created thee" (Arabic Hidden Words no. 4). Hence, a definition of human nature as essentially spiritual not only affirms the equality of all people; it also calls upon everyone to act with a pure heart and a fair mind in everyday life in order to contribute to the advancement of society.

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insignificant decisions that people make in everyday life. See Roderick A. Macdonald, *Lessons of Everyday Law*.



In telling the stories of those early believers whose humble existence could easily have been lost to history, *Memorials of the Faithful* invites and challenges the reader to undertake a number of important tasks. First, it encourages the reader to reconsider the social significance typically associated with such humble lives, and thereby to question the worldviews and assumptions that underlie such associations. At the same time, in assembling these portraits, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá also suggests the operation of an alternative perspective that sees such modest existence as noteworthy, interesting, valuable, and beautiful. He further invites the reader to reflect on the spiritual meaning and potential underlying daily choices and small moments of one’s own life, and to translate that recognition into concrete actions.

More broadly, *Memorials* invites the reader to relate faithfulness at the individual level to the creation of norms and values at the societal level, and to perceive how seemingly insignificant actions on the part of ordinary people can lead to extraordinary collective transformation over time. These broader insights become more apparent when the reader bears in mind that the transformation of the Bahá’í community over the past century and a half has indeed been achieved through the cumulative sacrifices of countless individuals whose ordinary existence finds many parallels in the stories of the early believers that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has chosen to memorialize in this collection.

## CONCLUSION

While the stories that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells about the early faithful must come to an end within the finite chapters of *Memorials of the Faithful*, faithfulness as a quality will live on and take shape in infinite forms across time and space. The Bahá’í community of Iran, having faced persecution since the time of the early Bábís, is rich in stories of such faithfulness. Their suffering, steadfastness, and spirit of sacrifice are captured in the following words of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá:

The friends of Iran are dearer to me than life and soul, for in the path of God they have suffered severe trials, sustained grievous afflictions, seen their homes plundered, become the target of slings and arrows of rebuke and reproach, offered up their very lives, and emerged from the crucible of trials and tribulations radiant as pure gold. (qtd. in Universal House of Justice, 14 May 2011)

In modern times, the Bahá’ís of Iran continue to face systematic and widespread persecution, ranging from execution and physical brutality, arbitrary arrest and imprisonment, social and economic exclusions—such as denial of education and employment—to denial of basic human rights—such as free speech and freedom of conscience and religion.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> For recent discussions, see reports

The Iranian authorities have carried out these acts of repression against all levels of the Bahá'í community, leaving none of its institutions and individual members unscathed. Because of its suffering, the Iranian Bahá'í community abounds in stories of faithfulness. For example, there are individuals who willingly carry out the responsibilities of community administration, despite the danger of being incarcerated or killed (Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre, *Faith Denied* 23–35). Business owners, farmers, workers, and pensioners choose to identify themselves as Bahá'í, even though such an admission jeopardizes their livelihood (*Faith Denied* 43–45; Bahá'í International Community, *Violence with Impunity* 14–18). Youth uphold their Faith despite the denial of higher education they suffer as a consequence (*Faith Denied* 46, 50; Universal House of Justice, 17 June 2011). School children courageously answer the slanderous accusations mouthed by their teachers and peers about their Faith (*Violence with Impunity* 20–23; Universal House of Justice, 11 May 2012, para. 2). Bahá'í families choose to remain in Iran in order to contribute to the development of their country, rather than emigrate elsewhere to

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by the Iran Human Rights Documentation Centre (available at [http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/religious\\_rights/baha-i](http://www.iranhrdc.org/english/religious_rights/baha-i)) and the Bahá'í International Community (available at <http://www.bic.org/persecution-Bahá'í-community>).

seek a better life (Universal House of Justice, 31 October 2008, para. 6).

Despite the high price they must pay to be faithful and steadfast, the Bahá'ís of Iran have repeatedly, on a daily basis, chosen to be true to their identity and their beliefs. Their stories, in the words of the Universal House of Justice, testify

to the clarity of the exalted vision of the Bahá'ís of Iran, to their valour in the face of cruelty and persecution as they pursue their noble goals, to their readiness to bear an oppression born of ignorance and prejudice with a spirit of constructive resilience, and to their determination to seek justice with patience and fortitude. (27 August 2013 para. 3)

In a poem specifically written for Bahá'ís outside Iran, an imprisoned Iranian Bahá'í, Sa'íd Rezá'í, has woven the extraordinary stories of his community into a broader narrative about humanity's long journey toward world peace and unity.<sup>9</sup> It symbolically

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9 The authors received a copy of Mr. Rezá'í's poem from his childhood friend Dr. Mina Yazdani, and learned from her the following story about the poet:

“Sa'íd was born in Shiráz, Iran, in 1957 and was one of the last Bahá'ís of his generation to graduate from an Iranian university because of a general policy to deny Bahá'ís from receiving higher education. He ran a successful independent engineering firm after he married Shahin

connects the struggles and sacrifices of Bahá'ís of Iran with the open and unfinished story that each of us creates in our daily lives, and situates these ever-unfolding and diverse human experiences in the eternal Covenant that God has made with humanity. In a way, the poem invites all of us to envision the meaning of faithfulness in our own context and to realize that vision in the choices we make each day. It was this poem and the life of this poet that inspired the authors of this essay to examine the myriad ways there are to express faithfulness.<sup>10</sup>

Rouhaniah and started a family. In 2005, he was appointed a member of the ad-hoc committee (called Yárán), formed to manage the affairs of the Iranian Bahá'í community which had been deprived of its elective administrative governing bodies (the Spiritual Assemblies) since the early 1980s. Later that year, he was arrested and imprisoned for a few months because of his Bahá'í activities. Three years later, on 14 May 2008, he and his six Yárán colleagues were arrested again. This time, they were sentenced to 20 years of imprisonment. He and his male colleagues are currently being held in the Rajá'í Sháhr jail.

While in prison in 2010, Sa'íd managed to contact Mina Yazdani, one of his old friends from Shiraz, to share with her poems that he has written during his incarceration, and requested that they be translated into English and shared with the Bahá'ís outside Iran. The poem quoted in the text of this essay is the translation of one of those poems."

10 For another book of poems written

*Wayfarer of Heart and Soul<sup>11</sup>*

I remained in the night  
 You pushed ahead toward the full  
 sun  
 I remained in chains  
 You soared to the greatest heights.

This story, yours and mine, is an  
 unusual saga  
 The story of one body  
 The tales of one heart  
 The narrative of one soul  
                     Of its lips, singing  
                     Of its dreams of  
 flight  
 The story of two hands, tied  
                     Of feet, in chains.

This story, yours and mine,  
 Is the story of departure, and of  
 remaining  
 And of strides, each facing a  
 mountain.

Have you heard the pulse of steps  
 on the rocks?  
 Or have you seen a child climbing  
 a tree?  
 One foot must remain, steadfast  
 and patient  
 For the other to seek upper  
 branches, higher grounds  
 To take flight and to find new  
 paths.

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by an imprisoned Iranian Bahá'í, see Mahvash Sabet, *Prison Poems*, trans. Bahiyyih Nakhjavani (Oxford: George Ronald, 2013).

When I saw you stride high,  
 boundless as the wind,  
 I challenged my own limitations  
 and doubts  
 And embraced the pain that was  
 my lot,  
 And I stood fast on the ground  
 Undeterred by the harshness of  
 thorns and stones.

You soared beyond limits,  
 Beyond imagination and dream,  
 And my pain became my joy,  
 And the harsh path ahead felt as  
 soft as the clouds above.

I make a pledge to stand fast on  
 the ground  
 For you to remain the light-footed  
 wayfarer of heart and soul.

This story, yours and mine,  
 Is that of a loving heart  
 Beating and beating  
 Within the ailing body of our  
 world  
 That suffers from an ancient pain  
 And is thirsty for new blood and  
 fresh air.

Let me take away the darkness  
 and the stale air  
 And make room for the fresh  
 breeze and the new scent that  
 you bring;  
 For the worst pain, I swear, is  
 nothing but pure joy,  
 If it means happiness for all hu-  
 manity, black and white and  
 native and oriental.

Our story: a tale of union and  
 separation,  
 Of the burning candle that shed  
 tears and gave light.  
 Of the nightingale and the moth,  
 The lovers of song and flight  
 The narrators of the story of the  
 candle  
 The timeless secret of its desire  
 to fly  
 And its destined share of burning  
 and singing.

Thus, you opened your wings  
 And you sang my pain;  
 You heard and you told;  
 You sang and you soared  
 Towards the daylight, towards  
 the bright sun  
 Above all summits  
 Over all clouds.

And I pledge  
 That I shall remain bright,  
 And I shall continue to recite,  
 So that you keep the story alive  
 And sing the song of the friend  
 And remain the wayfarer of heart  
 and soul.

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