

Walking the Spiritual Path with Both Feet Planted Firmly on the Ground

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Abstract

Since 1956 Joyce has been searching for the answer to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s prophetic exhortation to “[a]ttach great importance to the indigenous population of America” because “should they be educated and guided, there can be no doubt that they will become so illumined as to enlighten the whole world” (qtd. in Shoghi Effendi, *Citadel* 16). With each attempt to discover her true identity, Joyce is led closer to the answer of her lifelong search to find the way to that illumined world. In pursuit of this goal, Joyce has educated herself about the culture and stories of her clan and tribe to discover those beliefs that will act as a bridge of understanding between herself and her family and tribal members. Grandmothers, great aunts, and all their friends have enriched Joyce’s learning with many gems of understanding and have brought her ever closer to finding the answers she seeks.

Resumé

Depuis 1956, Joyce cherche la réponse à l’exhortation prophétique de ‘Abdu’l-Bahá : « Vous devez attacher une grande importance aux Indiens, premiers habitants de l’Amérique » car « si ces Indiens sont éduqués et guidés comme

il convient, il ne fait aucun doute qu’ils deviendront si illuminés que la terre entière sera illuminée. » (cité dans *Citadel* 16). À mesure qu’elle s’est efforcée de découvrir sa véritable identité, Joyce s’est approchée davantage de l’objet de sa quête existentielle pour découvrir la voie vers ce monde illuminé. Pour ce faire, Joyce s’est renseignée sur la culture et les histoires de son clan et de sa tribu afin de cerner les croyances qui permettront de jeter un pont de compréhension entre elle-même et sa famille ainsi que les membres de sa tribu. Ses grand-mères, arrière-tantes et tous leurs amis ont enrichi le processus d’apprentissage de Joyce en lui transmettant de nombreuses perles de compréhension, qui l’ont rapprochée de plus en plus des réponses qu’elle cherche.

Resumen

Desde 1956, Joyce ha estado buscando la respuesta a la exhortación profética de ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sobre “dar gran importancia a la enseñanza de los indígenas...de América” porque “si estos aborígenes fuesen educados y obtuviesen guía, llegarán a ser tan iluminados que a su vez podrán derramar luz sobre las regiones” (citado en *Citadel* 16). Con cada intento por descubrir su verdadera identidad, Joyce es dirigida más cerca a la respuesta de su búsqueda de toda la vida por encontrar una vía a ese mundo iluminado. En búsqueda de esta meta, Joyce se ha educado acerca de la cultura e historias de su clan y tribu para descubrir esas creencias que fungirán como un puente de conocimiento entre ella y su familia y los miembros de su tribu. Abuelas, tataras tías y todas sus amistades han enriquecido el aprendizaje de Joyce con muchas gemas de conocimiento y la han llevado cada vez más cerca a encontrar las respuestas que busca.

My story begins in May 1956 when I signed a Bahá'í "declaration card" and met with the Local Spiritual Assembly so they could determine if I really understood what I was doing. I was almost eighteen years old. The Assembly decided I knew what I was doing and sent my card to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States. Granted, I was a newbie in the Faith and could not possibly know the full implications of my decision to declare my acceptance of the Voice of God for this day, Bahá'u'lláh. What I *did* know was that for the first time in my life, faith and religion finally made sense, a sense that included all the people of the world and that explained why there were so many churches and why they seemed to be at odds with one another. I was grateful that my prayers to find God were heard and answered. A few years earlier, at age thirteen, I had quit the church I was attending because of the bigotry I experienced there, and I prayed that God would show me where to find Him. I told Him I did believe He was there but, please, show me where to find Him and how to follow Him. It took five years for that to happen.

A few weeks before I enrolled, Joyce Anderson Combs—my friend since elementary school—had signed her declaration card. She was the first Tlingit Indian to enroll in the Faith in Alaska (*High Endeavors* 77–78). The Local Assembly received this letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi praising it for its success in enrolling two Indian believers:

The news you conveyed of the enrollment of Miss Campbell was most welcome. The Guardian is very proud to have these Indian Bahá'ís in the Faith, and hopes that they will make every effort to carry the Message of Bahá'u'lláh to their people, remembering always the promises of the beloved Master of how great the Indians would become when the illumination of this Revelation reached them. (*High Endeavors* 27)

And so, my new life began.

Born in 1938 in Metlakatla on Annette Island, the only Indian reserve in Alaska, I was my parents' second child. Both of my parents had full-blooded Tsimshian mothers and both had European fathers—when you do the math, that makes me half-Tsimshian, too. Metlakatla was dubbed "the most non-Indian all-Indian village" in Alaska. The village was split between two competing denominations, neither of which would tolerate "Indianness." By that, I mean that there was no effort to teach children Shimalgyk, the language of the Tsimshians—no traditional dances, regalia, songs, or observances. Indianness was frowned upon by the churches and by their members. During the two generations prior to mine, speaking Shimalgyk was forbidden.

My family lived in Metlakatla until 1941, when we moved to Ketchikan. At that time, Ketchikan was a fish-cannery town that also had lumber-producing mills. It was a town divided

between the newcomers and the local Indians. On one side of the creek was "Indian Town" (where we lived), and on the other side was "Newtown," where the white people lived. Indian women were employed in the fish canneries, while Indian men caught and sold fish to the canneries. There were upwards of a dozen fish canneries operating in Ketchikan, which became known as the "fish capital of the world."

My mother grew up in Ketchikan and was one of the first Indians to attend public school following a suit brought by a family against the school board for barring three Indian girls from attending. Segregation was no longer legal; however, hidden prejudices surfaced in subtle attempts to keep Indians out of public school. The case was won by the only Indian lawyer in Alaska, and of the three girls, my mother was the only one who chose to go to public school. She told me it was because she wanted to have a good education and knew that would not happen in the Indian school.

My father and paternal grandmother also moved to Ketchikan from Metlakatla. He graduated from high school, but, as was the case for all Indian men, the only work available for him was fishing and logging, both high-risk jobs. In 1949, when I was ten years old, my father was lost at sea while towing logs.

My gratitude is endless for all that my mother endured for us children. She kept all five of us together after my father's death in that awful winter

of 1949. Her uncle, the mayor of Metlakatla, offered to take two of us girls to raise as his own, even though he and his wife were already raising thirteen children. Mom thanked him but declined and said that her family would stay together. I often thanked my mother for not giving me away when she had the chance. That would always bring a smile to her face.

Not too much changed in Ketchikan when the first Bahá'í pioneers arrived. There were still "Indian Town" and "Newtown." The law forbade segregation, but the prejudices that gave rise to it were still underlying all aspects of life.

The Ketchikan Local Assembly is to be praised for its efforts to follow the instructions of Shoghi Effendi. Study classes were immediately set up for me to learn about the Covenant and the Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh. I believe those classes set my feet firmly on the path of learning that has kept me in the Faith for all these years. Also, praise goes out to those wonderful pioneers who left their homes to move to Alaska. Their obedience and love for this new Faith continue to inspire me.

I was a Bahá'í when I graduated from the same high school my father had attended. It was very thrilling to me when most of the Assembly members came to my graduation. Looking out at the audience and seeing so many of the Bahá'ís gave me a wonderful feeling of being accepted and supported.

The Bahá'ís brought to my attention 'Abdu'l-Bahá's statement on the

high calling that the Indians of the Americas had been given; namely, that when educated and given the divine teachings, they would “become so illumined as to enlighten the whole world” (*Citadel* 16). I had no clue how that was to come about—I was only eighteen, and no one I knew had gone to college. Somehow, I knew I had to obtain an education even though I did not know how that would come about. It was a mystery to me how people got money to go to school in a far-off city. And, as for being spiritual, in reality I had considered myself a Christian “drop-out” since the age of thirteen.

My mother accepted the news that I wanted to become a Bahá'í and did not speak against it. Instead, she told my older sister to go with me to the firesides¹ and find out exactly what I had gotten myself into. Mom was the one who taught me that religions were like spokes in a wheel—they all lead to the same thing. By the following year, my sister had also enrolled. To be very sure that we were safe, my mother held meetings at her home with a couple of the seasoned pioneers, and soon after she signed her declaration card, as well. She remained a Bahá'í until she died in 2010.

A big influence in my life was my paternal, full-blooded Tsimshian grandmother. Before enrolling, I

mailed to her a Bahá'í pamphlet that listed some of the fundamental teachings of the Faith. She sent it back to me with a handwritten note at the bottom that said, “These are good Christian teachings—follow them.” I believe she recognized the voice of God in those teachings. She constantly reminded me how lucky we were to be born Indian. She died in Seattle in 1956, shortly after my enrollment in the Faith. Years later, my husband and I looked for her gravesite in a Seattle cemetery to offer prayers for her and found that she had been buried at the edge of the Japanese section of the cemetery—which is separate from the whites-only sections—because there was no Indian section.

By July of my first year as a Bahá'í, I had become engaged to Jay “Leo” Baldwin, one of the Bahá'í pioneers who had come to Ketchikan in February 1956. He was twenty-two, and I was eighteen. We married in October that same year. Leo had enrolled in the Faith in Corpus Christi, Texas, and shortly afterward, he attended the National Bahá'í Convention in Wilmette, Illinois, where he heard the call for pioneers and made his decision to go to Alaska. I asked him why he chose Alaska, and he said it was because of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s instructions to go where you can speak the language of the people. In Alaska, English was the accepted language.

He has always been my support, encouraging me to continue with my education because of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s statement about the importance of

1 The Bahá'í name for informal gatherings often held in the homes of individual believers to share the teachings of the Faith to friends and acquaintances who have shown an interest in the subject.

teaching the Indians. It took several years and many moves from my little fishing town, but I finally became the first female in my family to receive a college degree. However, I still grappled with the question of how the Indians would fulfill their destiny as foretold by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Another Tlingit girl, Martha, enrolled in the Faith. Her fiancée also enrolled; then my sister, Roberta, along with her new husband; after that, my mother. The following spring, two more married Native couples enrolled. Eventually, a rumor started circulating in Ketchikan that in order to become a Bahá'í you had to marry an Indian! That one always brought chuckles from the Native Bahá'í sisters.

When we were in the middle of the Ten Year World Crusade that our beloved Shoghi Effendi had initiated, several of the young Bahá'ís consulted and decided that we needed to deepen our understanding of the Administrative Order,² so we set up weekly classes to read and study together. Most of those who studied together remained in the community, working for the advancement of the Faith. Many have gone into the next realm, where I imagine they are still hard at work serving the Cause.

A few Native Bahá'ís slowly drifted away; I have remained close in friendship to a few of them. No indication of blame, or finger-pointing; just a quiet

fading out from community life. Most are living lives of quiet service to others, to their families, and to their Native communities. Some indicate they still love Bahá'u'lláh and want to show that love by giving service to others. For those who remained, those formative years were fundamental in learning to rely on the Administrative Order. Just discovering how to use the gift of this system devised by Bahá'u'lláh was a huge undertaking. In addition to learning the art of consultation, we were constantly encouraged to teach, teach, and teach some more!

Many Natives joined the Faith and were actively trying to promote teaching the Faith in Native communities. We did not know exactly how to do this and tried many approaches. Shoghi Effendi encouraged us to have all-Native conferences where we could consult among ourselves, but some of the non-Native Bahá'ís saw this as divisive and expressed resentment at being excluded, possibly because they felt that they were the real Bahá'ís and we, the Natives, were still learning; possibly because they were measuring success by material wealth and not by character; or possibly because they were of the culture that produced the missionary attitude of "I know more." It took time for some members of the Bahá'í community to understand the difference between unity and uniformity. I felt that some of them still were locked into the idea of "assimilation," a European concept that had been pursued for hundreds of years since outsiders first made contact with

2 A Bahá'í term indicating the system of institutions that administers the affairs of the Bahá'í community.

our shores. Only our commitment to the Faith will overcome differences in outlook.

A committee was formed to address the task of "Indian teaching." The chairwoman came from the lower forty-eight states and had no experience with Alaskan village life. She would choose only the well-dressed, well-groomed, articulate teachers to travel to remote villages, preferring them over the Indians who volunteered to go but were not materially well-off.

Shoghi Effendi, so loved by the Native Bahá'ís, left us in 1957. In 1963 the Ten Year Crusade had been completed, and we all breathed a sigh of relief when the Universal House of Justice was elected. A new spirit invigorated us all, and a renewed teaching effort was launched in Alaska. Teaching teams of Bahá'í youth were recruited from the western states. Mass teaching began in Alaska in the late 1960s and continued each summer through 1976. Youth enlisted in the "Army of Light" and came to Alaska one hundred strong. They traveled and taught in many of the Native villages, and they were able to enroll many Native believers throughout Alaska. I was hopeful that now I would see the path for the illumination of the world.

More learning had to be undertaken. We read that teaching and consolidation had to go hand in hand. We tried many forms of consolidation, but the numbers that had been won in the initial teaching programs were quickly being lost. The teaching committees that were organized to follow up

in the villages were being dominated by those new to village life. They sent teachers to the villages who were chosen according to how successful they were by their own culture's criteria rather than how well they understood the village culture. In one village, thirty souls had accepted the Faith; today, only an isolated handful remains. Hours of consultation were held on how to consolidate the villages. More learning and more growing were required to move forward.

My first gleaning came in 1959 when Leo and I and our two babies moved to Corpus Christi, Texas, to help run a moving company that belonged to Leo's mother, who was ill. I saw firsthand the gross materialism that infected the lower forty-eight states. Alaska, being so isolated from the continental United States, was spared much of the consumerism that is part of everyday life in the other states.

In 1956, Leo received a letter from Shoghi Effendi addressed to all pioneers, requesting them to remain at their posts at all costs. Around that same time the government notified Leo that he had been drafted into the Army. We prayed about it and decided he would have to obey the draft notice. We wondered who would win—the government or Shoghi Effendi. No contest there: they deferred Leo after finding a heart murmur that would have been detrimental to him had he participated in basic training in Anchorage in November. He remained at his post until his mother's illness

brought us out of Alaska and into Texas.

After two years, my mother-in-law recovered from her illness and we set our sights on returning to Leo's pioneer post and my hometown. By then we had three young children, ages four, three, and one. We lived and worked in Ketchikan until 1969, when the call to pioneer came once again from our new Alaskan National Spiritual Assembly. The appeal was for a pioneer to move to Wrangell, Alaska. By then we had had a fourth child, a girl born in 1963, shortly before the election of the first Universal House of Justice. We consulted together with all the children about another move to a smaller city. Even though they were small, our children were very aware of our commitment to the Faith. They all agreed that we should move to Wrangell and help to establish the Faith in that small city. Notices were given to our employers, and in May, when school was out, we moved to Wrangell.

I wish to acknowledge how well our children responded to the move, and my sister deserves a word of praise for her devotion to keeping the classes running and the children richly rewarded with her endless supply of homemade cookies. All my children loved Auntie Bobbie and her gigantic cookie jar.

There was only one other Bahá'í family that lived outside of Wrangell. All four children in that family were close in age to our own children, so it was natural that the first activity set up was a weekly children's class at

their house down the road. Many life-long friendships were formed thanks to those children's classes.

To give you an idea of a children's class in Wrangell, just imagine children reciting prayers they had memorized, when one peeks around and exclaims, "Hey! What's that?" We all look out the window and watch a ginormous black bear walk by the house on all fours. As it passes the Volkswagen Beetle parked outside, its back can be seen clearly over the car! The lady of the house says quietly, "It's just a black bear on its way to the dump. The bears go up there every day to rummage through the garbage for food. Okay, who's next with their prayer?"

Lots of teaching was carried out by both adults and children. By the next Ridván, there were a few enrollments, two of which were from local Natives from Wrangell clans, and two more families, including Auntie Bobbie and her family had moved into our town, so the first Local Spiritual Assembly of Wrangell was formed. One of the Native believers was the local artist Harry Ukas. An estimated twenty percent of the population of Wrangell were from Native clans. The majority of these were Tlinget; others were either Haidan or Tsimshian.

By early 1975, the National Spiritual Assembly of Alaska had embarked on an ambitious program of teaching. An estimated one hundred young people joined the "Army of Light," as the team was called, and traveled throughout Alaska carrying the message of hope to all. Wrangell was ready to

receive a group of those young believers, and a campaign was launched with help from the children's classes, which had grown to nearly twenty children and four teachers. The children created lap books and put them together for the team to use when they went door to door inviting residents to an evening program of music and talk. The lap books were a collection of pages showing Bahá'í principles with relevant pictures cut from magazines. The children chose the pictures and glued them to the proper pages

Our Local Spiritual Assembly had raised fifteen thousand dollars in cash and in-kind donations for the teaching effort. A daily prayer campaign was launched before the teaching team arrived, and devotional meetings took place at different homes. Children attending Bahá'í classes, including children from families who were not enrolled in the Faith, requested in advance to host a devotional at their homes. For nineteen days, we prayed to ensure the success of the teaching efforts, and the Local Spiritual Assembly wrote a letter to invite our beloved Rúhíyyih *Khánúm*—the wife of Shoghi Effendi and a Hand of the Cause in her own right—to join us for a "Victory Celebration." She visited Wrangell shortly after the end of the campaign and spent two glorious days with us, meeting with the Assembly members and visiting with the community for a Nineteen Day Feast that was attended by over seventy-five believers, including youth and children—most of them new.

Rúhíyyih *Khánúm* especially wanted to meet the Native believers. She encouraged us all to continue learning all we could about our beloved Faith and, in turn, to carry the message to our families. We all were greatly inspired by her talks.

We noticed then that many of the new community members had participated in our Bahá'í children's classes even though their parents were not Bahá'í. The wisdom of these classes was not realized for many years—not until our beloved Universal House of Justice created the "core activities,"³ the first of which is the children's class. But at that point, we had a core of youth between the ages of fifteen and eighteen years old. The question was, "How do we consolidate them?"

In 1975 the Local Spiritual Assembly launched a project called "An Indian Summer": youth were invited from the communities of Southeast Alaska to spend a few weeks in Wrangell—housed and fed by the Bahá'í families—to take part in a learning program that included visiting Native artists and Native leaders in order to learn more about the culture of the people that had lived in Southeast Alaska for thousands of years. The local Native Bahá'ís helped set up daily appointments for the youth to visit the families of artists and ask them questions, take notes, and learn. I accompanied

3 The "core activities" include children's classes, devotional gatherings, study circles, and junior youth animation groups.

the youth on these visits and discovered how little I knew of my own culture. It was like coming home.

This experience helped me to partially answer the question of how 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prophecy would be fulfilled. Bahá'u'lláh's injunction to "know [our] own self" (*Tablets* 24) was ever present on my mind. I was still ignorant of the history of my family, my clan, my tribe. No one in my family seemed to want to talk about it. At this point, my interest in learning about my ancestors and their way of life began to grow within me. The youth were wonderful, attentive, and genuinely interested in what they were learning. Most of those Native youth remained faithful to the teachings of the Faith. That was enough to kindle my own interest.

Our children were close to graduating from high school when conditions over which we had no control caused the economy of Wrangell to come to a screeching halt. Every effort was made to keep our business alive, but to no avail. The entire Southeast Alaska wood industry had been brought to a standstill. Logging camps closed. Lumber mills shut down. Pulp mills failed. With prayers and consultation we made the decision to move to California to find work and to be able to put our children in college.

I view that move as very instrumental in furthering my own education about Native American history and spirituality. In California, both Leo and I found work that served the interests of the Native tribes of the area. I

worked for the Local Indians for Education (LIFE) chapter in Central Valley, first as the secretary/bookkeeper and then as the acting director. Leo found work as the director of United Native Indian Tribes of Central Valley. A whole new set of learnings was in store for us.

We slowly began our education in the history that was never taught to us in public schools. I had grown up with only a bit of knowledge about the three tribes in Southeast Alaska and the Aleuts and Inuit from the North. Ketchikan had become home to a large number of Aleuts who had been forced to leave their island homes because of the threat of invasion by Japan during World War I.

Two employees of the LIFE chapter, a Pit River Indian lady and myself, were chosen to take a course in Federal Indian Law that was being taught at D-Q University near Davis, California, by Dennis Banks, an American Indian Movement leader. D-Q University was among the first six tribal colleges and universities in the United States, and the first in California. The course opened my eyes to the many actions undertaken by the American government to assimilate Indian people. My education in Indian affairs continues to this day. Why is this important to me? Because it has set me more firmly on the road to discovering why the Indian is so determined to remain "Indian" and avoid assimilation, as well as how that fits in with 'Abdu'l-Bahá's prophecy.

The new civilized world of the United States represents division,

multiple denominations, competition, power-seeking over others and the environment, and the race to accumulate wealth at all costs. The Indian vision of the world is one of working together to care for families, clans, and villages—and to do so without harm to the environment. The Indian learned how to live together with the animals, taking only what was needed for food. He knew from observing his surroundings how the world operated and did not try to conquer nature. He understood that there is a balance between the physical and the spiritual worlds and did his best to maintain it.

My oldest daughter, Roxanna, graduated high school and started college in Shasta County, California. She and her husband, Allen Jensen, were determined to get their education, and Leo and I were equally determined to help them obtain it. When they subsequently decided that they wanted to attend the University of Washington in Seattle, we felt that it was our responsibility to assist them. So, we preceded them by moving to a small community near Seattle, and I went to work for the Muckleshoot Tribe as executive secretary. A new adventure was at hand.

The tribe's executive director had arranged for a satellite program of classes from Antioch University to be held on the reservation, and he asked me if I was interested in obtaining a college degree. He felt that if I—a Native woman from another tribe—enrolled and was successful, others from the Muckleshoot Tribe would be

encouraged to enroll also. Up to that point, I had taken night classes wherever I lived and had stacked up close to seventy college credits. I jumped at the chance, particularly because the director said that if I did enroll, my primary obligation would be to my studies and then, if I had time, I could do some work for him. By 1980 I had completed my courses and earned enough credits to graduate with a bachelor's degree in Business Administration. How marvelous is the fate in store for those who strive.

Roxanna and Allen, however, changed their minds and decided to remain in California and attend Humboldt State University in Arcata, as it was much smaller than the University of Washington. Leo and I agreed it was a good choice. By then, my daughter was carrying her first child, but she was determined to complete her education. Leo and I decided to move to Arcata before they got there to ensure that she would have a support system available to her when she had her baby. Both my daughter and her husband are Bahá'ís, and his family was also very involved in pioneering and teaching in Africa and California.

We lived in Arcata from 1980 to 1996. Roxanna and Allen graduated from Humboldt State University in 1984. In 1986, Leo and our youngest daughter, Angela Higley, graduated on the same day from Humboldt State University. Directly after graduating, Angela went to work as an accountant in the finance department of the Hoopa Tribe in Northern California,

where she advanced to the position of chief financial officer. She is currently the CEO of the Cher-Ae Heights Indian Community of the Trinidad Rancheria, where she and her husband can be close to their daughter and their three grandbabies. Family is so important to Native people. We want our children involved in the life of the community, and we take them with us to all the meetings.

Our stay in Arcata brought with it many opportunities to become involved in Native teaching. Both my husband and I served on the Local Spiritual Assembly of Arcata. Our community hosted several Native traveling teachers and performers such as Kevin Locke, Dallas Chief Eagle, and Mitchell Silas, a Navajo sand painter. I puzzled over the community's seeming lack of enthusiasm for Indian teaching. Most members did not attend these activities or help organize them. In fact, many did not know any Natives, even though we were only seventy miles from the largest land-based reservation in California. The majority had never visited the reserve and were fearful of going there. I was told to be very careful as "everyone there carries rifles and you could be shot."

It was at this time of Native teaching that Leo and I were harshly criticized by some members of the Local Spiritual Assembly. They said that we were not teaching correctly and that we were sidestepping the Assembly's decisions in order to carry on our own way of teaching. Sanctions were put

on us that forbade us from teaching. Our wise National Spiritual Assembly responded by saying that everyone has the obligation to teach. The Local Spiritual Assembly then forbade us from being "public" teachers of the Faith. Rather than be a source of disunity to our community, we withdrew from all activities and carried on teaching in our home. We became very involved in peace activities and in a twelve-step group called Adult Children of Alcoholics (ACOA). It was at this time that another lady in ACOA and I showed the video *The Honour of All*⁴ to the Drug and Alcohol Task Force of the Hoopa Tribe. The task force was so taken with the success of the program to curb alcoholism shown in the movie that it called for a tribal gathering to watch it. Much good came from that learning by the Hoopa Tribe.

Some white Americans are afraid of Native people. And of African-Americans. And now, increasingly, of Muslim people. Some of these same prejudices manifest themselves even within our own Bahá'í communities one result of which is that once again many Native Bahá'ís are returning to their Native communities and learning more about the history and culture of

4 Produced by Native Bahá'í Phil Lucas, this 1987 docu-drama portrays the true story of the ultimately successful effort by the Alkali Lake Indian Band (British Columbia) to overcome alcoholism in their community. The film won the prestigious International Public Television (INPUT) Award.

their own people. A positive outcome of this reaction is a greater acceptance of the responsibility to teach our own people rather than relying on those outside the community to take on this responsibility.

Another outcome for me is that the more I learn, the more I believe in the spiritual nature of Native Bahá'ís. Perhaps the teaching that the tree that is pruned the most bears the most fruit⁵ can be applied to the history of America's policy of genocide against the Indian people of this continent. Simply put, I believe the Hand of God alone has kept the remaining Native people alive in this country and the trials they have endured have made them particularly receptive to the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

The experience in Arcata, California, is a good example of what I mean. This was a community where we learned by process of trial and error. As is widely known, Native peoples are highly susceptible to the disease of alcoholism. Consequently, we became involved with helping to set up a Bahá'ís in Recovery Program (BIRP) in a nearby city where a few Native and non-Native Bahá'ís wanted to start a program of healing. The Local Spiritual Assembly in that city heard the request to approve the group being started within their civil boundaries, and while it approved of BIRP, it decided that since some non-Bahá'ís would be attending, no Bahá'í prayers should be used.

How strange that was to me at the time. Indeed, it took a long time and a great deal of thought and observation to come to the conclusion that much spiritual growth was still necessary for many of the current non-Native Bahá'ís as well as the Native ones. I also found that unless there is a Native person humbly requesting a specifically Native activity, little teaching would be directed toward the Native Americans in California. As I realized this, I came to appreciate how great it is that Bahá'ís throughout the world are encouraged to use individual initiative! When many of my Bahá'í friends would declare, "I don't know any Indians." I would say, "You know me." Too often I would get the response, "I don't think of you as an Indian. You're a Bahá'í!" But being a Bahá'í does not mean I don't need to express my cultural perspective and share my desire to reach out to other Native Americans.

Soon after, I decided to retire from the best job I ever had and move north. Leo and I moved to the Quinault Reservation in Washington, where our oldest daughter and her family were living and working. She was the special education teacher for the reservation school system, and her husband was the fish hatchery manager. Leo and I both went to work for a beautiful lodge on Lake Quinault, but Native teaching was always on our minds. There were no administrative institutions to consult with, so we operated as isolated believers on the basis of individual initiative.

⁵ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks* 51.

Sessions for breakfast and study were set up at our home on the lake every Sunday morning. One of the books we carefully studied was *Century of Light*. We are still close with that small but faithful group of friends who gathered to strive to understand this great Faith. *Century of Light* made a great impact on me, and I sent it to my brother, Brent, who was also a Bahá'í and who was then enduring a great test. He later told me that Bahá'u'lláh was the only constant in his life. That made me even more grateful for the pioneers who brought this Faith to Alaska.

We were happy there on Lake Quinault. It is located in a rainforest and is surrounded by great evergreen trees and mountains, and it offered us a fabulous lake at our doorstep. Elk herds often passed by our little house—fences could not keep them out. So it was with regret that we accepted our destiny to move from that lovely sanctuary and return to another large community in Washington. The decision came after torrential rains combined with melting snow on the mountains caused the lake to flood and overrun houses and roads. It was time to move.

This time we settled in a very loving community in Tumwater, Washington. The members welcomed us with open arms and treated us like family. Was I home? That's what it felt like. This community was very familiar with Native life and reservations, as Washington has twenty-nine federally recognized tribes in addition to a large

number of tribes that are not yet recognized by the federal government.

My husband found a job in maintenance at a large hotel in Tumwater, and I was hired as a claims manager for the Washington State Department of Labor and Industries. We bought a mobile home in a senior park, and our new life began. Life was good there. We jumped into all the activities in our small but loving community, working and getting to know our neighbors and creating opportunities to teach the Faith.

Our oldest daughter and her family were reassigned from the Quinault Reservation to the Makah Reservation on the northern tip of the Olympic Peninsula. They were instrumental in reinstating the Bahá'í Council Fire on the Makah Reservation in Neah Bay, Washington. The Bahá'í Council Fire was an annual three-day campout on the beach, and it provided many opportunities for teaching. We made numerous visits there and became acquainted with many of the Native Bahá'ís. We looked forward to the Bahá'í Council Fire all year, and we promoted it heavily among the friends in nearby communities. As the years progressed, more and more Native believers were invited to speak of the Faith within the great circle of friends that were in attendance. Some years there were only three hundred people; other years there were upwards of five hundred souls gathered to enjoy each other's company by singing around the campfire, telling stories, and hearing about the wonderful victories of the Faith

in other lands. Young and old alike created many wonderful memories in that place. We were actively practicing the oneness and beauty of all mankind during the days of the Neah Bay Council Fire.

It was at this time that I felt the compulsion to create my own regalia, a button robe that would depict my clan—the Gisbutwada or Killer Whale clan—and tribal life. There was no one there to teach me, so I did the next best thing: I found a book in the library that showed me how to make my own robe. Little did I know that soon I would have the chance to wear and dance in my newly created leaping killer whale robe. Considering that I was making a robe for the first time—and without a skilled clan member to teach me—it turned out pretty good.

New advancements for the Faith were underway. Study circles were found to be a real community booster. There was occasional talk of something called “Ruhi.” No one seemed to know exactly what that was. From the Universal House of Justice, to the National Spiritual Assemblies, and then to the newly formed Regional Bahá'í Councils⁶ came the call to immerse ourselves in the Ruhi Institute process. We didn't know what that was, but many arose to learn and attempt to meet the challenge. We set

up intensive study circles at Brighton Creek, a facility near Thurston and Pierce Counties in Washington.

A new compulsion to absorb the Ruhi process overcame me, and I spent many three-day weekends at Brighton Creek, a Bahá'í retreat where the Institute Board had arranged for intensive learning to occur. Around that time a call came from the Institute Board⁷ for an all-Indian, intensive version of the Ruhi Institute course with as many Indian tutors as could be found. With great joy I found myself in the most spiritual atmosphere, surrounded by so many of what truly felt like members of my own family, searching out the hidden meanings in the soul-stretching words of our Faith. At that time many reached a new level of commitment to serve the Faith. Finally, the day came when I finished Book 7, the tutor training book, and was able to start facilitating study circles in my own community and cluster. I began my tutor development program, several study circles were set up, and the institute process advanced in Thurston County.

Five years had passed since we had moved into the Tumwater community.

7 The board responsible for Bahá'í training institutes. The concept of training institutes was introduced by the Universal House of Justice in the mid-1990s. Its purpose is to assist individuals in deepening their understanding of the Bahá'í teachings and to help them gain the spiritual insights and the practical skills they need to carry out the work of the community.

6 An element of Bahá'í administration, between the local and national levels, instituted by the Universal House of Justice (Letter to All National Spiritual Assemblies, 30 May 1997).

All my children were grown, serving humanity in their chosen fields. Life was good. Learning was now a way of life. More Natives were joining the Faith. I found a beautiful teaching from Bahá'u'lláh: "Should anyone give you a choice between the opportunity to render a service to Me and a service to [your parents], choose ye to serve them, and let such service be a path leading you to Me" (from a Tablet translated from the Arabic, quoted in *Compilations* 387). It was at that time that my dear mother announced her great desire to return to Ketchikan located on the island where she was born. All of her family was gone from that area, however, and we were concerned about her going back by herself. Since I was now at the age that I could retire and draw a pension, my husband and I consulted, prayed, and decided to go with my mother back to Alaska. Ketchikan was also Leo's original pioneering post, and he felt a need to return and continue serving the Faith there.

There is no such thing as sacrifice. Even when we think we are giving up something, there is something more valuable in store for us. When we left Ketchikan in 1969, it was still a segregated town. Natives were never hired to work in public positions. Jobs for Natives were still in fishing, cannery work, or trades of some kind. Indian Town was still Indian Town. Now, fast-forward thirty-five years to 2004, I could hardly believe my eyes. Native art was visible all over the downtown area. New totem poles had been placed

in strategic positions throughout the town. Ketchikan Indian Community, now a federally recognized tribe, had a new administrative building smack-dab in the middle of Newtown that included a health clinic and a mental health clinic. In the banks, half of the tellers were young Native girls. Cruise ships made regular four- to six-hour layovers in Ketchikan so that visitors could tour the island to see the Native carving houses, where master carvers instructed young Native apprentices in the beautiful art of the Pacific Coast. Our Indianness was no longer hidden, but proudly displayed.

I was able to attend an intensive course in my own tribal language. There I met other older women of my tribe who invited me to join their dance group. The button robe I had been compelled to create could now be used when I danced with the Tsimshian Dance Group at public ceremonies, totem pole raisings, services honoring clan chiefs, and even memorials for those Native leaders that had passed on into the next world.

None of this was present when I grew up there except for those dances that were performed in secret places. As a young child, on very rare occasions, my grandmother took my sister and I in a truck full of other people at night to a place out of town. We would enter a large building that had black blankets covering the windows and doors, and then we were led to a place where we sat with many others, waiting in the dark. At a signal, a drum would loudly announce the start

of the ceremony and dancers in regalia leapt onto a floor lit with firelight.

I am so grateful for the time I was given to learn some of my language and culture and to join my clan sisters in singing and dancing the stories of our ancestors. During those times that I would sing in the language of my ancestors, my grandmother would be right there by my side. Thank you, Grandma. Your encouragement helped me find the Faith that has guided my life!

Those were very happy years. We served on the Local Spiritual Assembly. I tutored many study circles. For three summers I worked as a guide for the million or so tourists who visited our island, and in the winters, I worked part time as a substitute elementary teacher. The degree I earned at the Muckleshoot Reservation came in handy: I did not have a teaching certificate, but in our school system one can be a substitute teacher if one has a bachelor's degree. We spent seven years in Ketchikan getting to know my mom, my clan, and the way of life of the Natives of this land. A new learning began to take shape.

Shoghi Effendi asked the Native believers to teach their own people. We had to learn how to do that. We had to grow into the commitment to do that. We had to grow in our love for Bahá'u'lláh so that our teaching became the delight of our hearts. We had to get into that community to reach and teach those around us. Now I know there is no sacrifice. I get more from being my own true self. There is always more to know and discover.

After Mom's passing (the locals in Ketchikan refer to it as having taken "a walk in the woods"), on a day when Leo, at age seventy-five, was up on the roof of the house shoveling snow, we decided to move south where there was less snow. Alaska is a place for young men to become accustomed to hardship, to learn who they are. It was time for us to go south with the birds.

We recently returned to Tumwater. We bought a larger home in that same senior park we left behind when we took Mom back to Ketchikan and are currently enjoying the many opportunities to know and love the people that live here. God is good.

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