

THE ETERNAL EXAMPLE

Mastery

QUOTATIONS | STORIES | REFLECTIONS



QUOTATIONS

*A*nd the honor and distinction of the individual consist in this, that he among all the world's multitudes should become a source of social good. Is any larger bounty conceivable than this, that an individual, looking within himself, should find that by the confirming grace of God he has become the cause of peace and well-being, of happiness and advantage to his fellow men? No, by the one true God, there is no greater bliss, no more complete delight.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization

*T*he happiness and greatness, the rank and station, the pleasure and peace, of an individual have never consisted in his personal wealth, but rather in his excellent character, his high resolve, the breadth of his learning, and his ability to solve difficult problems.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization

*T*he wrong in the world continues to exist just because people talk only of their ideals, and do not strive to put them into practice. If actions took the place of words, the world's misery would very soon be changed into comfort. A man who does great good, and talks not of it, is on the way to perfection. The man who has accomplished a small good and magnifies it in his speech is worth very little.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Paris Talks

*T*hen it is clear that the honour and exaltation of man cannot reside solely in material delights and earthly benefits. This material felicity is wholly secondary, while the exaltation of man resides primarily in such virtues and attainments as are the adornments of the human reality. These consist in divine blessings, heavenly bounties, heartfelt emotions, the love and knowledge of God, the education of the people, the perceptions of the mind, and the discoveries of science. They consist in justice and equity, truthfulness and benevolence, inner courage and innate humanity, safeguarding the rights of others and preserving the sanctity of covenants and agreements.

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They consist in rectitude of conduct under all circumstances, love of truth under all conditions, self-abnegation for the good of all people, kindness and compassion for all nations, obedience to the teachings of God, service to the heavenly Kingdom, guidance for all mankind, and education for all races and nations. This is the felicity of the human world! This is the exaltation of man in the contingent realm! This is eternal life and heavenly honour!

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Some Answered Questions

We must now highly resolve to arise and lay hold of all those instrumentalities that promote the peace and well-being and happiness, the knowledge, culture and industry, the dignity, value and station, of the entire human race. Thus, through the restoring waters of pure intention and unselfish effort, the earth of human potentialities will blossom with its own latent excellence and flower into praiseworthy qualities...

'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization

I desire distinction for you...But this distinction must not depend upon wealth—that they should become more affluent than other people. I do not desire for you financial distinction. It is not an ordinary distinction I desire; not scientific, commercial, industrial distinction. For you I desire spiritual distinction—that is, you must become eminent and distinguished in morals. In the love of God you must become distinguished from all else. You must become distinguished for loving humanity, for unity and accord, for love and justice.

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In brief, you must become distinguished in all the virtues of the human world—for faithfulness and sincerity, for justice and fidelity, for firmness and steadfastness, for philanthropic deeds and service to the human world, for love toward every human being, for unity and accord with all people, for removing prejudices and promoting international peace. Finally, you must become distinguished for heavenly illumination and for acquiring the bestowals of God. I desire this distinction for you.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, The Promulgation of Universal Peace

*T*he words, the deeds, the attitudes, the lack of prejudice, the nobility of character, the high sense of service to others—in a word, those qualities and actions which distinguish a Bahá'í must unfailingly characterize their inner life and outer behavior, and their interactions with friend or foe.

Rejecting the low sights of mediocrity, let them scale the ascending heights of excellence in all they aspire to do. May they resolve to elevate the very atmosphere in which they move, whether it be in the school rooms or halls of higher learning, in their work, their recreation, their Bahá'í activity or social service.

Universal House of Justice, letter dated 8 May 1985 to the Bahá'í Youth of the World

Wherefore, O loved ones of God! Make ye a mighty effort till you yourselves betoken this advancement in all these confirmations, and become focal centres of God's blessings, daysprings of the light of His unity, promoters of the gifts and graces of civilized life. Be ye in that land vanguards of the perfections of humankind; carry forward the various branches of knowledge, be active and progressive in the field of inventions and the arts. Endeavour to rectify the conduct of men, and seek to excel the whole world in moral character. While the children are yet in their infancy feed them from the breast of heavenly grace, foster them in the cradle of all excellence, rear them in the embrace of bounty. Give them the advantage of every useful kind of knowledge. Let them share in every new and rare and wondrous craft and art.

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Bring them up to work and strive, and accustom them to hardship.
Teach them to dedicate their lives to matters of great import, and
inspire them to undertake studies that will benefit mankind.

Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

*A*t this time, likewise, I most urgently request the friends of God to make every effort, as much as lieth within their competence, along these lines. The harder they strive to widen the scope of their knowledge, the better and more gratifying will be the result. Let the loved ones of God, whether young or old, whether male or female, each according to his capabilities, bestir themselves and spare no efforts to acquire the various current branches of knowledge, both spiritual and secular, and of the arts. Whensoever they gather in their meetings let their conversation be confined to learned subjects and to information on the knowledge of the day.

If they do thus, they will flood the world with the Manifest Light, and change this dusty earth into gardens of the Realm of Glory.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, from a Tablet, translated from the Arabic

*T*he chosen ones of God ... should not content themselves merely with relative distinction and excellence. Rather they should fix their gaze upon nobler heights by setting the counsels and exhortations of the Pen of Glory as their supreme goal. Then it will be readily realized how numerous are the stages that still remain to be traversed and how far off the desired goal lies – a goal which is none other than exemplifying heavenly morals and virtues’.

Shoghi Effendi, Living the Life

*T*he most vital duty, in this day, is to purify your characters, to correct your manners, and improve your conduct. The beloved of the Merciful must show forth such character and conduct among His creatures, that the fragrance of their holiness may be shed upon the whole world, and may quicken the dead, inasmuch as the purpose of the Manifestation of God and the dawning of the limitless lights of the Invisible is to educate the souls of men, and refine the character of every living man—so that blessed individuals, who have freed themselves from the murk of the animal world, shall rise up with those qualities which are the adornings of the reality of man....

Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

O army of God! Through the protection and help vouchsafed by the Blessed Beauty— may my life be a sacrifice to His loved ones— ye must conduct yourselves in such a manner that ye may stand out distinguished and brilliant as the sun among other souls. Should any one of you enter a city, he should become a centre of attraction by reason of his sincerity, his faithfulness and love, his honesty and fidelity, his truthfulness and loving-kindness towards all the peoples of the world, so that the people of that city may cry out and say: “This man is unquestionably a Bahá’í, for his manners, his behaviour, his conduct, his morals, his nature, and disposition reflect the attributes of the Bahá’ís.” Not until ye attain this station can ye be said to have been faithful to the Covenant and Testament of God....

Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá

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STORIES

“*S*eldom have I seen one whose appearance impressed me more. A tall strongly-built man holding himself straight as an arrow, with white turban and raiment, long black locks reaching almost to the shoulder, broad powerful forehead indicating a strong intellect combined with an unswerving will, eyes keen as a hawk’s, and strongly-marked but pleasing features—such was my first impression of ‘Abbas Effendi, “the Master” as he par excellence is called. ...

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One more eloquent of speech, more ready of argument, more apt of illustration, more intimately acquainted with the sacred books of the Jews, the Christians, the Muhammadans, could, I should think, scarcely be found even amongst the eloquent, ready, and subtle race to which he belongs. These qualities, combined with a bearing at once majestic and genial, made me cease to wonder at the influence and esteem which he enjoyed even beyond the circle of his father's followers. About the greatness of this man and his power no one who had seen him could entertain a doubt."

Professor Edward Granville Browne, Cambridge University orientalist, 1890

*D*uring World War I when a blockade threatened the lives of many civilians in Haifa, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá saved them from starvation. ‘He personally organized extensive agricultural operations near Tiberias, thus securing a great supply of wheat’. Food was stored in underground pits and elsewhere. This He distributed to inhabitants, regardless of religion or nationality. The food was systematically rationed. Having started His preparations as early as 1912, He averted tragedy in the dark days of 1917 and 1918. At war’s end the British were quick to recognize His painstaking accomplishments. He was to be knighted on 27 April 1920, at the residence of the British Governor in Haifa at a ceremony held especially for Him. British and religious dignitaries came to honour Him on this auspicious occasion. His unselfish acts had won Him the love and respect of high and low alike.

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'Abdu'l-Bahá consented to accept the knighthood, but He was not impressed with worldly honour or ceremony. Even a formality must be simplified. An elegant car was sent to bring Him to the Governor's residence, but the chauffeur did not find the Master at His home. People scurried in every direction to find Him. Suddenly He appeared 'alone, walking His kingly walk, with that simplicity of greatness which always enfolded Him.'...Quietly, without pomp, 'Abbas Effendi arrived at the right time at the right place and did honour to those who would honour Him when He was made Sir 'Abdu'l-Bahá Abbas, K.B.E. a title which He almost never used.

Honnold, Annamarie, Vignettes from the Life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

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REFLECTIONS

*In what ways does 'Abdu'l-Bahá provide us with an example of Mastery?
How does he encourage us to achieve distinction?*

What types of distinction may need to be sacrificed for “spiritual distinction”?

How can we prevent ourselves becoming distracted by or attached to the secondary happiness and comfort of “material delights and earthly benefits”? What examples and standards do we have for moderation in this arena?

How can we make sure that we avoid self-righteous attitudes and paternalism whilst dedicating ourselves to the service, happiness and upliftment of others?

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