

THE ETERNAL EXAMPLE

Servitude

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QUOTATIONS

*A*s to my station, it is that of the servant of Bahá; ‘Abdu’l-Bahá,
the visible expression of servitude to the Threshold of the Abhá Beauty.

Selections from the Writings of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, no.26.

*B*ut he that is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whosoever shall exalt himself shall be abased; and he that shall humble himself shall be exalted.

Matthew 23:11-12 KJV / 59

*T*his wronged servant has spent his days and nights in promoting the Cause and urging the peoples to service. He rested not a moment, till the fame of the Cause of God was noised abroad in the world and the celestial strains from the Abhá Kingdom roused the East and the West. The beloved of God must also follow the same example. This is the secret of faithfulness, this is the requirement of servitude to the Threshold of Bahá!

The Will and Testament of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

A distinguishing characteristic of Bahá'í life is the spirit of servitude to God. To labour in the arena of service, the individual draws upon his love for Bahá'u'lláh, the power of the Covenant, the dynamics of prayer, the inspiration and education derived from regular study of the Holy Texts, and the transformative forces that operate upon his soul as he strives to behave in accordance with the divine laws and principles.

The Universal House of Justice, "The Institution of the Counsellors"

...*E*very aspect of a person's life is an element of service to Bahá'u'lláh: the love and respect one has for one's parents; the pursuit of one's education; the nurturing of good health; the acquisition of a trade or profession; one's behaviour toward others and the upholding of a high moral standard; one's marriage and the rearing of one's children; one's activities in teaching the Faith and in building up the strength of the Bahá'í community; and, of course, one's daily prayer and study of the Writings.

*From a letter dated 22 September 2002 written on behalf of the
Universal House of Justice to an individual believer*

*K*now that nothing will benefit thee in this life save supplication and invocation unto God, service in His vineyard, and, with a heart full of love, be in constant servitude unto Him.

Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas

*S*ervice to humanity is service to God. Let the love and light of the Kingdom radiate through you until all who look upon you shall be illumined by its reflection. Be as stars, brilliant and sparkling in the loftiness of their heavenly station. Do you appreciate the Day in which you live?

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

Soon will our handful of days, our vanishing life, be gone, and we shall pass, empty-handed, into the hollow that is dug for those who speak no more; wherefore must we bind our hearts to the manifest Beauty, and cling to the lifeline that faileth never. We must gird ourselves for service, kindle love's flame, and burn away in its heat. We must loose our tongues till we set the wide world's heart afire, and with bright rays of guidance blot out the armies of the night, and then, for His sake, on the field of sacrifice, fling down our lives.

Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, no. 210

*S*ervice to the sons and the daughters of the Kingdom is the diadem of everlasting glory with which ye have crowned your heads, the garment of eternal sovereignty with which ye have adorned your bodies, and the throne of majesty and grandeur of heaven upon which ye sat.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Tablets of Abdul-Baha Abbas

*S*ervitude to God lieth in servitude to the friends. One must be the essence of humility and the embodiment of meekness. One must become evanescence itself and be healed of every disease of the self, in order to become worthy of thralldom to the Threshold of the Almighty.

From a Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá—translated from the Persian

O ye friends of God, redouble your efforts, strain every nerve, till ye triumph in your servitude to the Ancient Beauty, the Manifest Light, and become the cause of spreading far and wide the rays of the Daystar of Truth. Breathe ye into the world's worn and wasted body the fresh breath of life, and in the furrows of every region sow ye holy seed. Rise up to champion this Cause; open your lips and teach. In the meeting place of life be ye a guiding candle; in the skies of this world be dazzling stars; in the gardens of unity be birds of the spirit, singing of inner truths and mysteries....

Wherefore, rest ye neither day nor night and seek no ease. Tell ye the secrets of servitude, follow the pathway of service...

Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, no.218

*T*herefore, so long as there be a trace of life in one's veins, one must strive and labour, and seek to lay a foundation that the passing of centuries and cycles may not undermine, and rear an edifice which the rolling of ages and aeons cannot overthrow — an edifice that shall prove eternal and everlasting, so that the sovereignty of heart and soul may be established and secure in both worlds.

Makátib-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá (Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá), vol. 4

*N*ow is the time for service, and for servitude unto the Lord. Release yourselves from all distracting thoughts, deliver the Message with an eloquent tongue, adorn your assemblages with praise of the Beloved, till bounty shall descend in overwhelming floods and dress the world in fresh greenery and blossoms. This streaming bounty is even the counsels, admonitions, instructions, and injunctions of Almighty God.

Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, no.236

Why then are ye quenched, why silent, why leaden and dull? Ye must shine forth like the lightning, and raise up a clamoring like unto the great sea. Like a candle must ye shed your light, and even as the soft breezes of God must ye blow across the world. Even as sweet breaths from heavenly bowers, as musk-laden winds from the gardens of the Lord, must ye perfume the air for the people of knowledge, and even as the splendors shed by the true Sun, must ye illumine the hearts of humankind. For ye are the life-laden winds, ye are the jessamine-scents from the gardens of the saved. Bring then life to the dead, and awaken those who slumber. In the darkness of the world be ye radiant flames; in the sands of perdition, be ye wellsprings of the water of life, be ye guidance from the Lord God. Now is the time to serve, now is the time to be on fire. Know ye the value of this chance, this favorable juncture that is limitless grace, ere it slip from your hands.

Selections from the Writings of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, no.210

*H*e is the All-Glorious!

O God, my God! Lowly and tearful, I raise my suppliant hands to Thee and cover my face in the dust of that Threshold of Thine, exalted above the knowledge of the learned, and the praise of all that glorify Thee. Graciously look upon Thy servant, humble and lowly at Thy door, with the glances of the eye of Thy mercy, and immerse him in the Ocean of Thine eternal grace.

Lord! He is a poor and lowly servant of Thine, enthralled and imploring Thee, captive in Thy hand, praying fervently to Thee, trusting in Thee, in tears before Thy face, calling to Thee and beseeching Thee, saying:

O Lord, my God! Give me Thy grace to serve Thy loved ones,

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strengthen me in my servitude to Thee, illumine my brow with the light of adoration in Thy court of holiness, and of prayer to Thy kingdom of grandeur. Help me to be selfless at the heavenly entrance of Thy gate, and aid me to be detached from all things within Thy holy precincts. Lord! Give me to drink from the chalice of selflessness; with its robe clothe me, and in its ocean immerse me. Make me as dust in the pathway of Thy loved ones, and grant that I may offer up my soul for the earth ennobled by the footsteps of Thy chosen ones in Thy path, O Lord of Glory in the Highest.

With this prayer doth Thy servant call Thee, at dawntide and in the night-season. Fulfill his heart's desire, O Lord! Illumine his heart, gladden his bosom, kindle his light, that he may serve Thy Cause and Thy servants.

Thou art the Bestower, the Pitiful, the Most Bountiful, the Gracious, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

'Abdu'l-Bahá



STORIES

A friend had sent some fur so that the Master could have a good warm coat; He had it cut up and made into twenty caps for the elderly men of the town.

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

*H*e was the most unassuming of men. He counted himself personally as less than others, put himself below them and served them in every way he could find with unaffected humility. He used to entertain at his table visitors from far and near; but if the occasion were one of special importance he would rise and wait on his guests with his own hands - a practice he recommended to other hosts. When his father was alive and dwelt outside 'Akká among the mountains, 'Abbás Effendi used frequently to visit Him, and though the way was long he habitually went on foot. His friends asked him why he did not spare himself so much time and effort and go on horseback. "Over these mountains Jesus walked on foot," he said. "And who am I that I should ride where the Lord Christ walked?"

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Once when in his latter days he had to return from a distance to his home, he took a seat in the common stage. The driver thought this unseemly in a man of his standing and remonstrated with him for not hiring a private carriage; but 'Abbás Effendi insisted on using the stage. At the end of his journey as he alighted, he was accosted by a beggar to whose pleading he listened and to whom he gave a gold coin. Then turning to the driver, he said - "Why should I travel in a carriage when such as he need money?"

But this humility did not come from any weakness. It was a proof of his strength and a cause of his spiritual power. Once when a child asked him why all the rivers of the earth flowed into the ocean, he said, "because it sets itself lower than them all and so draws them to itself."

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...His humility was not due to any diffidence or other failing. Nor did it imply any self-abasement or self-deprecation. What it meant was the obliteration of the personal self. His separate ego had no existence at all save only as an instrument of expression for the higher self that was one with God. He did not minimise his spiritual station, nor did any circumstance large or small separate him from it. He upheld under all conditions the cause to which his heart was given.

George Townshend, The Way of the Master

*T*here are many stories about beloved Grace Robarts Ober who, for so very many years, dedicated every moment of her life to the service of our glorious Cause. And this experience, she felt, was the ‘first small step’ - to use her words, that set her feet on the path. Grace had been introduced to the Cause by that early dedicated soul, Lua Getzinger, and Grace had, at once, recognized Bahá’u’lláh and become a Bahá’í. Not long afterward, Lua came to Grace and told her that very soon ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was to arrive in New York and she, Lua, had been asked by Him to go to Chicago and prepare a place there in which he might stay when he arrived in that city. Would Grace like to go to Chicago with Lua and help with this preparation? Of course Grace would! So, together, they went to Chicago from Los Angeles, found a suitable apartment, prepared it and, eventually, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá came to live in it.

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When His stay in Chicago was nearly over, suddenly one morning Grace realized what it would mean to go back to the dead stuffiness of her former life and leave this clear and radiant glory in which she'd been living while she helped Lua keep house for the Master. So she went to 'Abdu'l-Bahá and begged that, when he returned to New York, she might help with that household too, as she had been privileged to do in Chicago. 'Abdu'l-Bahá looked at her very searchingly and said, "Greece (His loving nickname for Grace) Greece, are you SURE you wish to serve ME?" Grace said, with great enthusiasm, "Oh, YES! More than anything else in the world!" 'Abdu'l-Bahá made no answer but walked away. The next morning this scene was repeated. On the third morning, Grace, frantic at the realization that this was the last morning before He was leaving to go farther West, went to Him a third time - and this time He became very stern. Are you VERY SURE you wish to SERVE ME? Grace was startled at the sternness but she didn't waver. "YES I am VERY SURE."

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So then he nodded. “Very well go, settle up your affairs, and we will meet in New York.” Jubilant and radiant, Grace settled up her ‘affairs’ - which consisted of subletting a cottage she had taken at Greenacre for the summer and doing a few other things. Then, with wings on her feet, she went to New York. Lua was already there and together they prepared for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s return. The day came. Many Bahá’ís had gone to meet Him, though Lua and Grace had remained at the house to welcome Him. The door opened, He came in. He welcomed Lua warmly, glanced at Grace as at a complete stranger, and turned away. Grace was appalled, shocked. Hadn’t He recognized her? Had He forgotten her? Had she misunderstood the permission to come to New York? Or had she displeased Him and was this punishment? Whatever it was, it continued with no let-up. During all the days that followed ‘Abdu’l-Bahá never showed by word or glance that He recognized her in any way - except to put her to work.

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Whenever she relaxed at all throughout any day, word would come at once, through Lua, setting her to work harder at some new task. She worked in that household until long after midnight - cleaning, cooking, scrubbing, and then she would rise at five in the morning to begin all over again. She worked as she had never worked before in all her life and 'Abdu'l-Bahá ignored her completely. If they ever chanced to meet he would draw aside His robe for her to pass and his glance would go through her as if she were not there. At last came the day when the movies of 'Abdu'l-Bahá were to be taken over in Brooklyn at the home of Howard MacNutt. And Grace thought, wearily, "at least I will be included in THIS since EVERYONE in the household is to go." But, an hour before the several carloads of people were scheduled to leave, Lua came to Grace to say that 'Abdu'l-Bahá felt that someone should remain at the house to welcome two ladies who were expected that morning, and Grace was to be the one to stay behind.

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So when the cars left - Grace stood at the top of the flight of brownstone steps and watched them all roll away. Then, she turned and went into the empty house. For a moment she stood there, fighting the feeling of desolation and abandonment and loneliness, and then she thought of the white roses that had been delivered that morning, as they were daily, for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's room. The one bright spot in these dreadful days for Grace had been that she was the one to arrange these roses each morning. So, with the long florists' box in her arms, she climbed up to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's room at the top of the house, where He had wished to be. She reached the top of the third flight - and found the door not only closed, but locked against her. And always before it had stood wide open! This, for Grace, was the last straw. Overwhelmed by all the hurt and bewilderment of all these days, she sank down on the floor and wept with the fallen roses scattered around her. At last, the sobs faded, her tears spent themselves, and, exhausted, she gathered up the roses and went back downstairs.

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The expected ladies had not arrived, nor did they ever arrive. But Grace - it was now past noon - was hungry. So, she went down to the kitchen to get something to eat. And in that house that fed, each day, so many dozens of people, there was nothing to eat but one egg and a small piece of leftover bread in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's bread-box... So Grace boiled her one egg and put her small portion of bread on a plate. Putting the egg in an egg cup, she chipped the shell - and the egg, as bad as an egg can get, exploded in her face. She cleaned up the mess and returned to her bit of leftover bread. And, as she crumbled the bread, eating it crumb by crumb she realized, suddenly, exactly what she was doing - she was, blessedly, eating the crumbs of the bread of life from 'Abdu'l-Bahá's table. She began to eat even more slowly as the spirit of prayer came to possess her. Not long after this the household returned from Brooklyn - and that evening Lua came to Grace and said, "The Master has asked me to tell you that He knows you wept."

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And this was the first time it had occurred to Grace that all this dreadful experience might have a reason, a pattern. And - if this were true she must find out what the reason could be. So she went up to her room to pray about it. To pray for illumination and wisdom and the selflessness to understand. And as she prayed she heard a small voice saying 'Are you as happy scrubbing the garbage pails as you are arranging the roses?' And she suddenly realized what the spirit of true service was. It was to rise to selfless joy in offering the service, no matter what form that service might take. And as this truth swept over her, suffusing her, illuminating her, the door opened, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá walked into the room. His arms were outstretched; His dear face was glorified. "Welcome!" He cried to Grace, "Welcome to the Kingdom!" And he held her close, embracing her deeply. And never did He withdraw Himself from her again.

Reginald Grant Barrow, Mother's Stories: Stories of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Early Believers told by Muriel Ives Barrow Newhall to her son, p. 17-19



REFLECTIONS

What does the story of Grace Robarts Ober teach us about the station of servitude? How can we ensure that we are serving for the sake of those we are seeking to help and not for our own sake? How can we maintain this attitude even when we go through difficulties?

What are some of the historical contexts which have made the station of servitude an undesirable one in much of our society? How might we inadvertently contribute toward and reflect these attitudes? How does the station of servitude described in the meditations above differ with society's present vision?

*In what ways can we support one another in becoming greater servants to our families, neighborhoods, strangers, friends, and communities?
Can you give an example of a way you have recently been served that touched your heart?*



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