

Practices for Devotional Meetings

Intone, O My servant,
the verses of God that have been received by thee,
as intoned by them who have drawn nigh unto Him,
that the sweetness of thy melody may kindle thine own soul,
and attract the hearts of all men.
Whoso reciteth in the privacy of his chamber,
the verses revealed by God,
the scattering angels of the Almighty
shall scatter abroad the fragrance of the words uttered by his mouth,
and shall cause the heart of every righteous man to throb.
Though he may, at first, remain unaware of its effect,
yet the virtue of the grace vouchsafed unto him
must needs sooner or later exercise its influence upon his soul.
Thus have the mysteries of the Revelation of God been decreed
by virtue of the Will of Him
Who is the Source of power and wisdom.
-Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh

PREPARATION

Atmosphere is critical: the sounds and smells and what is seen. If you have ever been to a Tranquility Zone, that's the idea -- attar of rose if you can afford it or rose oil, and soft music or a water fountain, and soft billows of pastel-colored cloth on the walls.

As much as possible without being objectionable or controlling, the host for the evening should attempt to keep conversation on spiritual topics – the focus at all times should be on the objective for the meeting, which is worship. Greetings and fellowship and love are to be encouraged, but there shouldn't be opportunity given for people to be allowed to fall into discussion of politics or much chit-chat. The meeting should start maybe 10 minutes after the appointed time.

The best way par excellence to discover the "science of the love of God" is to follow the steps proposed in the Tablet of the True Seeker (Kitáb-i Íqán, pp. 192-4), which describes how to seek "knowledge of the Ancient of Days". In fact, this approach is recommended as preparation for regular scientific research also. It is a method of purifying the soul and removing prejudices, so as to make it more open to spiritual knowledge. Inasmuch as spiritual knowledge, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá points out, can also overlap with "intellectual" knowledge, it doesn't seem that the method of preparing oneself to seek them need differ. So, what do you do?

First, "he must, before all else, cleanse and purify his heart, which is the seat of the revelation of the inner mysteries of God, from the obscuring dust of all acquired knowledge, and the allusions of the embodiments of satanic fancy."

Notice that this focuses on the "heart", not the brain. So this knowledge is not rational knowledge, which is the province of the mind, and seated in the brain. It is knowledge of a sort which is deeper, more atavistic, and is sensed by the heart, which is the sensory organ for spiritual knowledge, knowledge of the Science of Faith. Note also that "all acquired knowledge" must be purged. That is, everything. Knowledge of family, friends, self, language, other religious teachings -- everything, everything which is acquired. So this says that the knowledge we seek is not acquired. Huh? How can that be? It's not so hard, actually -- that which is not acquired is *innate*! So this must be an innate knowledge which we seek, which is obscured by knowledge that we have learned in life. Plus, of course, it is obscured by desires that are worldly -- not spiritual.

So if this knowledge is innate, then we don't need to be taught it -- we need to open ourselves to it. This is done through prayer and meditation. No need for worldly books or teachers, other than the Manifestation. And the Manifestation of God is manifest in the heart as well as in the Writings -- we can seek Him in both places, but for the purpose of this science of the love of God, we must seek Him within. "At the dawn of every day he should commune with God, and with all his soul persevere in the quest of his Beloved."

Also, the seeker of this science should act in his life in accordance with the teachings of the Manifestation, both in terms of living a moral life, in his treatment of animals and other people, and in his companions. Not the standard idea of the scientist, perhaps, but this kind of scientist -- the scientist of the love of God, lives in this way.

No person can teach another the results of this inquiry, as the knowledge can only be learned by the heart. The Writings point in this direction, they show the methods required to obtain this knowledge, they reveal many prayers and meditations, give the teachings of how to lead a moral life, but the results of this teaching manifest themselves only in the heart itself, how a person *is*, not what his brain knows or his tongue recites. The Universal House of Justice, in a letter dated 1983-09-01, wrote: "Bahá'u'lláh has specified no procedures to be followed in meditation, and individual believers are free to do as they wish in this area, provided that they remain in harmony with the Teachings."

"The prayerful condition is the best of all conditions, for man in such a state communeth with God, especially when prayer is offered in private and at times when one's mind is free, such as at midnight. Indeed, prayer imparteth life."

-From a recently translated Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

"The wisdom of prayer is this: that it causeth a connection between the servant and the True One, because in that state man with all heart and soul turneth his face towards His Highness the Almighty, seeking His association and desiring His love and compassion. The greatest happiness for a lover is to converse with his beloved, and the greatest gift for a seeker is to become familiar with the object of his longing -- that is why with every soul who is attracted to the kingdom of God, his greatest hope is to find an opportunity to entreat and supplicate before his Beloved, appeal for His mercy and grace and be immersed in the ocean of His utterance, goodness and generosity. Beside all this, prayer and fasting is the cause of awakening and mindfulness and conducive to protection and preservation from tests."

-*Tablets of 'Abdu'l-Bahá 'Abbás*, pp. 683-4

"[T]he core of religious faith is that mystic feeling which unites man with God. This state of spiritual communion can be brought about and maintained by means of meditation and prayer. And this is the reason why Bahá'u'lláh has so much stressed the importance of worship. It is not sufficient for a believer merely to accept and observe the teachings. He should, in addition, cultivate the sense of spirituality which he can acquire chiefly by means of prayer. The Bahá'í Faith, like all other Divine Religions, is thus fundamentally mystic in character. Its chief goal, is the development of the individual and society, through the acquisition of spiritual virtues and powers. It is the soul of man which has first to be fed. And this spiritual nourishment prayer can best provide. Laws and institutions, as viewed by Bahá'u'lláh, can become really effective only when our inner spiritual life has been perfected and transformed. Otherwise religion will degenerate into a mere organisation, and becomes a dead thing."

-From a letter written on Behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, 18 Dec, 1935

"The most acceptable prayer, is the one offered with the utmost spirituality and radiance; its prolongation hath not been and is not beloved by God. The more detached and the purer the prayer, the more acceptable is it in the presence of God."

-*Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, pp. 77-8

MENTION THE NAME OF GOD

"True remembrance is to make mention of the Lord, the All-Praised, and forget aught else beside Him."

-from Words of Wisdom, in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 155

The Arabic word for "mention" and also "remembrance" is *dhikr*. It is often used specifically to refer to the utterance of the name of God. Among Sufis (mystics of Islam) the word *dhikr* is used to refer to a mystical ceremony in which the name of God is said many many times in order to achieve an ecstatic effect. Bahá'u'lláh, who lived as a Sufi in the hills of Kurdistan for three years, was very familiar with the *dhikr* ceremony.

Multiple repetitions of the Greatest Name can be said in rounds -- 9 or 19 or 95 or 81 or 361 (number of *kullu shay'in* "all things") or 500 at a time. This is extraordinarily powerful.

In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas (#18) it is written:

It hath been ordained that every believer in God, the Lord of Judgement, shall, each day, having washed his hands and then his face, seat himself and, turning unto God, repeat "*Alláh-u-Abhá*" ninety-five times.

This injunction has frequently been compared to a *mantra* (a Sanskrit word meaning "word), which is used in Hindu or Buddhist terms for a word of power, which is often repeated for dozens of hundreds of times as a meditation tool. The idea is that the word itself can bring about a spiritual effect to the person repeating it – in addition, the mere

hypnotic repetition of the word induces a mental state conducive to relaxation of body and mind, and to allowing the influence of spiritual forces to affect the soul.

There are also a number of other sacred verses which are suitable for this kind of repetition. Some in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas are:

KA #11 On the appearance of fearful natural events call ye to mind the might and majesty of your Lord, He Who heareth and seeth all, and say "Dominion is God's, the Lord of the seen and the unseen, the Lord of creation".

KA #13 God hath exempted women who are in their courses from obligatory prayer and fasting. Let them, instead, after performance of their ablutions, give praise unto God, repeating ninety-five times between the noon of one day and the next "Glorified be God, the Lord of Splendour and Beauty".

KA #14 When travelling, if ye should stop and rest in some safe spot, perform ye -- men and women alike -- a single prostration in place of each unsaid Obligatory Prayer, and while prostrating say "Glorified be God, the Lord of Might and Majesty, of Grace and Bounty". Whoso is unable to do this, let him say only "Glorified be God"; this shall assuredly suffice him. He is, of a truth, the all-sufficing, the ever-abiding, the forgiving, compassionate God. Upon completing your prostrations, seat yourselves cross-legged -- men and women alike -- and eighteen times repeat "Glorified be God, the Lord of the kingdoms of earth and heaven".

Some of the shorter Hidden Words are well-suited for this purpose:

1. O SON OF SPIRIT!

My first counsel is this: Possess a pure, kindly and radiant heart, that thine may be a sovereignty ancient, imperishable and everlasting.

5. O SON OF BEING!

Love Me, that I may love thee. If thou lovest Me not, My love can in no wise reach thee. Know this, O servant.

9. O SON OF BEING!

My love is My stronghold; he that entereth therein is safe and secure, and he that turneth away shall surely stray and perish.

16. O SON OF LIGHT!

Forget all save Me and commune with My spirit. This is of the essence of My command, therefore turn unto it.

22. O SON OF SPIRIT!

Noble I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created.

36. O SON OF MAN!

Rejoice in the gladness of thine heart, that thou mayest be worthy to meet Me and to

mirror forth My beauty.

41. O SON OF MAN!

Magnify My cause that I may reveal unto thee the mysteries of My greatness and shine upon thee with the light of eternity.

48. O SON OF MAN!

For everything there is a sign. The sign of love is fortitude under My decree and patience under My trials.

54. O SON OF BEING!

If thine heart be set upon this eternal, imperishable dominion, and this ancient, everlasting life, forsake this mortal and fleeting sovereignty.

59. O SON OF BEING!

Thy heart is my home; sanctify it for My descent. Thy spirit is My place of revelation; cleanse it for My manifestation.

60. O SON OF MAN!

Put thy hand into My bosom, that I may arise above thee, radiant and resplendent.

68. O CHILDREN OF MEN!

Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest. Such is My counsel to you, O concourse of light! Heed ye this counsel that ye may obtain the fruit of holiness from the tree of wondrous glory.

38. O SON OF SPIRIT!

Burst thy cage asunder, and even as the phoenix of love soar into the firmament of holiness. Renounce thyself and, filled with the spirit of mercy, abide in the realm of celestial sanctity.

40. O MY SERVANT!

Free thyself from the fetters of this world, and loose thy Soul from the prison of self. Seize thy chance, for it will come to thee no more.

Some short prayers of the Báb are also good for this purpose – indeed, we are exhorted to say the “Remover of Difficulties” multiple times. In *God Passes By* (p. 119) it is related that Bahá'u'lláh said of this prayer:

“Tell them to repeat it five hundred times, nay, a thousand times, by day and by night, sleeping and waking, that haply the Countenance of Glory may be unveiled to their eyes, and tiers of light descend upon them.’ He Himself, I was subsequently informed, recited this same verse, His face betraying the utmost sadness.”

“Is there any Remover of difficulties save God? Say: Praised be God! He is God! All are His servants, and all abide by His bidding.”

-The Báb

or-

“Say: God sufficeth all things above all things, and nothing in the heavens or in the earth or in whatever lieth between them but God, thy Lord, sufficeth. Verily, He is in Himself the Knower, the Sustainer, the Omnipotent.”

-Selections from the Writings of the Báb (Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982, page 123

HOW OFTEN?

There is no “best number” for how often to say a prayer. More is not necessarily better. In the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá'u'lláh revealed:

Paragraph 149: “Recite ye the verses of God every morn and eventide. Whoso faileth to recite them hath not been faithful to the Covenant of God and His Testament, and whoso turneth away from these holy verses in this Day is of those who throughout eternity have turned away from God. Fear ye God, O My servants, one and all. Pride not yourselves on much reading of the verses or on a multitude of pious acts by night and day; for were a man to read a single verse with joy and radiance it would be better for him than to read with lassitude all the Holy Books of God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting. Read ye the sacred verses in such measure that ye be not overcome by languor and despondency. Lay not upon your souls that which will weary them and weigh them down, but rather what will lighten and uplift them, so that they may soar on the wings of the Divine verses towards the Dawning-place of His manifest signs; this will draw you nearer to God, did ye but comprehend.”

Shoghi Effendi wrote:

"Concerning the prayer for difficulty revealed by the Báb; he wishes me to inform you that it is not accompanied by the instructions for its recital.[1]"

[1 Written in response to a question as to how often this prayer should repeated to produce the greatest results.]

-From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual believer, March 6, 1937

GUIDED VISUALIZATIONS

In this case I am not referring to something like the popular “Visualize Peace”, but something much more specific. There are an ocean of powerful spiritual images used by Bahá'u'lláh in His Writings – these can be sources for inspiration and for representational art, and also for meditative visualizations. When planning a guided visualization, it is

essential to keep in mind the need to create a spiritual and stress-free environment in which the devotion takes place – scents and sounds should be supportive of the feeling you want to elicit in the participants. A few examples are given below:

Nightingale of Paradise (Tablet of Ahmad)

Tree of Eternity (Tablet of Ahmad)

The Lote-Tree beyond which there is no passing (Fire Tablet)

Maid of Heaven (Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of the Holy Mariner and Ode of the Dove)

We have unsealed the choice Wine with the fingers of might and power (Kitáb-i-Aqdas)

The shores of the ocean of true understanding (Kitáb-i-Íqán)

The wine of certitude (Kitáb-i-Íqán)

There are easily hundreds of examples. In order to do a guided visualization, it is important for the leader to go back to the original passage and read the description of the image in its original context. Fix the image in the mind. Draw it in mental detail. It is excellent practice to draw it on paper. What is required for this purpose is not artistic skill as such, but attention to detail. Participants should be sitting comfortably, or lying on their backs in a room with lights low and noise and distractions at a minimum.

For example, if you choose the Nightingale of Paradise, first set the scene. Say the viewer is seated at a wrought-iron chair in a beautiful garden, which you can describe in as much detail as you wish – describe the kinds of flowers and their scent. Describe the kind of day it is in a clear, quiet voice – maybe it is sunny with no clouds, maybe with scattered clouds at the horizon, maybe it is heavily clouded, but the clouds part as the visualization begins. Maybe it is windless and still, or there is a light refreshing breeze. The bird is sitting on the branch of a tree, probably – the Tree of Life it could be, or just a huge oak with great branches and deep roots, or a small persimmon sapling; maybe it's just perched on the fence which separates the garden from the rest of the earth. Then describe the bird itself. Imagine each part of the bird separately – feet with their color (according to a material nightingale or use the imagination), legs, wings, breast, neck and head – the size of the feathers, how they reflect the light. Then bring in the other senses. Say that a scent of attar of rose emanates from this nightingale, that it comes faintly to the nostrils at first, but then fills the nose with its sweetness. The nightingale sings. What is important is not so much how the bird sings note-by-note, but the feelings of participants – maybe there is a thrill of delight that begins at the back and spreads its thrumming vibration throughout the body; maybe there is warmth that starts at the ears themselves and spreads, or at the heart – the heart which is the organ for the sensation of all things spiritual – and as it pumps life-giving blood throughout the body, in this blood is a new factor, a factor of light which flows into every organ and tissue, giving it a healthy and beautiful glow (blue, maybe, the color of Paradise; or red, the color of sacrifice). This is the climax of the visualization, and the need is to keep the participants enthralled with this image in its fullness. Say the bird, filled with the joy of its song, *leaps* into the air and wings its way skyward; or perhaps it actually flies from the tree in which it has been sitting to alight upon the shoulder of the viewer, transfixing him with delight. It then flies higher and higher, or farther and farther, and then the scene itself begins to fade from view, the viewer is being brought back to her body, the scene fades, she is left immersed in the feelings of joy and warmth generated by the vision, then, when he feels ready, he opens his eyes, and soon, is able to arise. Maybe the entire exercise takes 15 minutes.

Afterwards, the participants may talk somewhat together, but they should not stay until they are back in a normal emotional state – the idea is that the heightened spiritual state should continue after their departure, so that life outside can be seen through the lens of the spirituality of the meeting and the idea be inculcated that this is a condition that can be brought to some extent to “normal” life.

CHANT

One of the things we are told to do is to chant prayers. This is easy for Persian Bahá'ís, who have a tradition for it, but for Americans, there isn't. So they either just re-interpret this as "read", or they set prayers to music, and sing them. But what "chanting" is, is a kind of at-the-moment improvisation, as God inspires you. People are often uncomfortable with that. But to me, that is a very important exhortation, as it teaches openness to the Divine Spirit in a way that is very direct and powerful.

Chanting prayers: this specifically *does not mean singing*. **Chanting**. Chanting means letting the syllables and sounds lead you, not having a melody set up in advance -- it is a form of improvisation, and is much more powerful and spiritual than singing. Ask the Persians. In this country, the format we have that is most suitable to chanting is jazz. Spiritual jazz. Think about some meditational improvisational jazz pieces. This can be taught. It is not a performance -- it is a prayer. Or think Gregorian chants, or Bach-type improvisations, if this format is more appealing.

Some suggestions:

Before beginning to chant, let the mind and body mind relax, and release the spirit into nothingness. Stay there for 10 minutes. Then start.

"It's not about the music, so forget the music. It has a lot to do with rhythm, and with tone. So first, just use one tone as you chant the prayer, but rhythmically. Focus on the meaning. Words, and meaning. When you feel like changing the tone, do so, but never let music take over, or let yourself try to consciously make music. Let your self be led by the words, and the meaning, and the rhythm, and the tones."

–Matthew Levine, Bahá'í musician.

Start by chanting Alláhu-Abhá. One word, once, on one tone. Feel the rhythm, the rhythm of the syllables of the word. Then again. One word, once, on one tone. Again. Then vary a tone. Up. Down. Play with it. End up saying it 9 or 19 or 95 times.

The Tablet of Ahmad says that we should chant it right in the text:

“He is the King, the All-Knowing, the Wise! Lo, the Nightingale of Paradise singeth upon the twigs of the Tree of Eternity, with holy and sweet melodies, proclaiming to the sincere ones the glad tidings of the nearness of God, calling the believers in the Divine Unity to the court of the Presence of the Generous One, informing the severed ones of the message which hath been revealed by God, the King, the Glorious, the Peerless, guiding

the lovers to the seat of sanctity and to this resplendent Beauty.

“Verily this is that Most Great Beauty, foretold in the Books of the Messengers, through Whom truth shall be distinguished from error and the wisdom of every command shall be tested. Verily He is the Tree of Life that bringeth forth the fruits of God, the Exalted, the Powerful, the Great.

“O Ahmad! Bear thou witness that verily He is God and there is no God but Him, the King, the Protector, the Incomparable, the Omnipotent. And that the One Whom He hath sent forth by the name of `Alí was the true One from God, to Whose commands we are all conforming.

“Thus doth the Nightingale utter His call unto you from this prison. He hath but to deliver this clear message. Whosoever desireth, let him turn aside from this counsel and whosoever desireth let him choose the path to his Lord.

“O people, if ye deny these verses, by what proof have ye believed in God? Produce it, O assemblage of false ones. Nay, by the One in Whose hand is my soul, they are not, and never shall be able to do this, even should they combine to assist one another.

“O Ahmad! Forget not My bounties while I am absent. Remember My days during thy days, and My distress and banishment in this remote prison. And be thou so steadfast in My love that thy heart shall not waver, even if the swords of the enemies rain blows upon thee and all the heavens and the earth arise against thee.

“Be thou as a flame of fire to My enemies and a river of life eternal to My loved ones, and be not of those who doubt.

“And if thou art overtaken by affliction in My path, or degradation for My sake, be not thou troubled thereby.

“Rely upon God, thy God and the Lord of thy fathers. For the people are wandering in the paths of delusion, bereft of discernment to see God with their own eyes, or hear His Melody with their own ears. Thus have We found them, as thou also dost witness.

“Thus have their superstitions become veils between them and their own hearts and kept them from the path of God, the Exalted, the Great.

“Be thou assured in thyself that verily, he who turns away from this Beauty hath also turned away from the Messengers of the past and showeth pride towards God from all eternity to all eternity.

“Learn well this Tablet, O Ahmad. Chant it during thy days and withhold not thyself therefrom. For verily, God hath ordained for the one who chants it, the reward of a hundred martyrs and a service in both worlds. These favors have We bestowed upon thee as a bounty on Our part and a mercy from Our presence, that thou mayest be of those who are grateful.

“By God! Should one who is in affliction or grief read this Tablet with absolute sincerity, God will dispel his sadness, solve his difficulties and remove his afflictions.

“Verily, He is the Merciful, the Compassionate. Praise be to God, the Lord of all the worlds.”

MOVEMENT

The movements of the Long Obligatory Prayer. Not the prayer itself, of course, but the *movements*, which are themselves powerful, according to 'Abdu'-Bahá. This exercise is in no way intended to replace the saying of the Obligatory Prayer; it is intended to assist us in feeling what it is intended to evoke in us.

" Bahá'u'lláh has reduced all ritual and form to an absolute minimum in His Faith. The few forms that there are-like those associated with the two longer obligatory daily prayers, are only symbols of the inner attitude. There is a wisdom in them, and a great blessing, but we cannot force ourselves to understand or feel these things, that is why He gave us also the very short and simple prayer, for those who did not feel the desire to perform the acts associated with the other two." From a letter written on Behalf of the Guardian to an individual believer, 24 June, 1949

Kitáb-i Aqdas, note to #6 In a Tablet commenting on the presently-binding Obligatory Prayers, 'Abdu'l-Bahá indicates that *"in every word and movement of the Obligatory Prayer there are allusions, mysteries and a wisdom that man is unable to comprehend, and letters and scrolls cannot contain"*.

Ablutions must precede the recital of the Obligatory Prayers. [NOTE: Ablutions-washing the hands and face in preparation for prayer.]

Here are all the instructions attached to the Long Obligatory Prayer, minus most of the words, so that participants can feel the power of the movements by themselves. This should be felt in the heart, not analyzed by the brain. Both are forms of intellect – we need to balance them. Read the instructions, and then say the words and feel how the movements relate to the words.

- 1 *Whoso wisheth to recite this prayer, let him stand up and turn unto God (that is, toward Bahjí[the resting place of Bahá'u'lláh]), and, as he standeth in his place, let him gaze to the right and to the left, as if awaiting the mercy of his Lord, the Most Merciful, the Compassionate. Then let him say:*
- 2 make of my prayer a fire
- 3 Let him then raise his hands in supplication [palm upward toward the face] toward God - blessed and exalted be He - and say:
- 4 Thou seest me turning toward Thee
- 5 Let him then kneel, and bowing his forehead to the ground, let him say:
- 6 Exalted art Thou
- 7 Let him then stand and say:
- 8 Make my prayer a fountain of living waters
- 9 Let him again raise his hands in supplication, and say:

- 10 I implore Thee not to withhold from me that which is with Thee
 11 *Let him then raise his hands, and repeat three time the Greatest Name. (Alláh-u-
 Abhá -- God is All-Glorious)*
 12 Let him then bend down with hands resting on the knees before God - blessed and
 exalted be He - and say:
 13 I beg of Thee all that is with Thee
 14 Let him then stand and raise his hands twice in supplication, and say:
 15 There is no God but Thee
 16 Let him then raise his hands thrice [Shoghi Effendi's secretary answered on his
 behalf as follows:
 "The hands should be raised three times and each time the sentence be repeated in
 conjunction with the act."], and say:
 17 Greater is God (Alláh-u-Akbar)
 18 Let him then kneel and, bowing his forehead to the ground, say:
 19 high art Thou
 20 Let him then seat himself and say:
 21 He who hath been manifested is the Hidden Mystery
 22 Let him then stand erect and say:
 23 My trespasses have kept me back from drawing nigh unto Thee
 24 Let him then repeat the Greatest Name thrice, and bend down with hands resting on
 the knees, and say:
 25 Praise be to Thee
 26 Let him then rise and say:
 27 my tears prevent me from remembering Thee
 28 Let him then repeat the Greatest Name thrice, and kneel with his forehead to the
 ground, and say:
 29 Thou hast sent down unto us that which draweth us nigh unto Thee
 30 Let him then raise his head, and seat himself, and say:
 31 The kingdoms of earth and heaven are Thine!
 -Bahá'u'lláh

Then have one person read the instructions, as people carry out the actions, and read the words. Do this several times, so that people have a feel for what is intended; then forego the words, and just say what the movements are, one after another – not fast, but steadily, with enough time for the mind to be suffused with the feeling evoked by that movement.

MUSIC

These days, with the popularity of drum circles soaring among a segment of the population, this is a possibility. A Bahá'í drum circle can be very uplifting and spiritual (and noisy). Anybody can pound on something as part of a group. The most basic beat – *ka-thump, ka-thump, ka-thump* – is known as the heart beat. It replicates the beating of the human heart. Do not lose sight of this heart beat – it is the center and focus around which the drumming is organized. Remember that the heart is the focus and sensory organ of faith and innate knowledge. This drumming, centered on the heart, is intended

to educate the heart and enable it to open to spiritual wisdom.

Generally, it is better for devotional purposes to avoid musical “performances” – someone doing the music and others not. Chanting or drumming together is much more powerful. For this purpose, the way it sounds is not so essential as the fact that it is being done together. This is completely different from a public performance, when the sound should be as professional as possible, in honor of the Author of the Faith. For different purposes, different approaches.

DRAMATIC PRESENTATIONS

How about a dramatic presentation of an incident from Dawnbreakers? This book is a mine for gems of heroic stories. What has prevented most people from gaining access to its endless bounties is the length of the book, the numerous and impenetrable names (to Westerners, and often even to Persians!), and the sonorous language in which it is written. But all this can be bypassed! That is what we mean by “poetic license”! Just use the stories as a basis for presentations. Old Persian dress is not required – it can be an impediment to recognizing the immediacy and relevance of the stories in the book.

Take an example, even of an obscure incident – literally, any incident in the book can be used to wonderful effect. Say the “Siege of Karbilá” on pp. 35-37 of Dawnbreakers, in which Sayyid Kázim-i-Rashtí tries to convince a band of disobedient citizens from mutinying against the government. This is an interesting story, as it shows the benefits of obeying government, the benefits of righteousness, and the results of disorder. It is a theme not often taught in these days when people are frequently taught that rebelliousness and excessive individualism are “cool”. Lots of opportunity for discussion in this story. Talk about how important it is for government to have the trust of its citizens in order to maintain order, and how an obedient citizenry can encourage government to be less oppressive of its people – it’s a two-way street.

Make a skit of it. There is a group of disobedient citizens under the leader of a self-proclaimed rebel and a pious preacher (or simply a godly man). The rebel expels the government-appointed mayor of the town and appoints himself mayor, appropriating all tax revenue for himself and his cronies. The central government sends the army to subdue him, and the commander of this force sends a message to the preacher, saying if the citizens submit to his force, he will be merciful, but if not, they will be slaughtered. The preacher asks the leaders of the rebellion to give up their vain rebellion, and they are inclined to do so. At the last, however, other religious leaders of the town, jealous of the preacher, make up false dreams of victory in order to ensure that the rebellion continues. So it does. The government-appointed commander easily overcomes the ragtag army of the rebels, and hundreds are slaughtered in the streets. The only place of sanctuary is in the house of the pious preacher. Simple, straightforward, full of action, full of opportunity for discussion of how a person should act in life.

Or another one: the story of the Sifter of Wheat (p. 99 of Dawnbreakers) is compelling and inspirational. It goes like this:

“The first to embrace the Cause of the Báb in that city [Isfahán] was a man, a sifter of wheat, who, as soon as the Call reached his ears, unreservedly accepted the Message. With marvellous devotion he served Mullá Husayn, and through his close association with him became a zealous advocate of the new Revelation. A few years later, when the soul-stirring details of the siege of the fort of Shaykh Tabarsí were being recounted to him, he felt an irresistible impulse to throw in his lot with those heroic companions of the Báb who had risen for the defence of their Faith. Carrying his sieve in his hand, he immediately arose and set out to reach the scene of that memorable encounter. "Why leave so hurriedly?" his friends asked him, as they saw him running in a state of intense excitement through the bazaars of Isfahán. "I have risen," he replied, "to join the glorious company of the defenders of the fort of Shaykh Tabarsí! With this sieve which I carry with me, I intend to sift the people in every city through which I pass. Whomsoever I find ready to espouse the Cause I have embraced, I will ask to join me and hasten forthwith to the field of martyrdom." Such was the devotion of this youth, that the Báb, in the Persian Bayán, refers to him in such terms: " Isfahán, that outstanding city, is distinguished by the religious fervour of its Shí'ah inhabitants, by the learning of its divines, and by the keen expectation, shared by high and low alike, of the imminent coming of the Sáhibu'z-Zamán [Lord of the Age]. In every quarter of that city, religious institutions have been established. And yet, when the Messenger of God had been made manifest, they who claimed to be the repositories of learning and the expounders of the mysteries of the Faith of God rejected His Message. Of all the inhabitants of that seat of learning, only one person, a sifter of wheat, was found to recognise the Truth, and was invested with the robe of Divine virtue!"”

Isn't this story ripe with dramatic possibility? A few suggestions:

1. The Sifter of Wheat was a lazy, useless boy as a youth. He hung around with the wrong companions, drank, was a bully, etc. He had no use for education, and so ended up as a lowly Sifter of Wheat, hating his life, its lack of opportunities, the unlikelihood that he would be able to marry, etc. Then he met Mullá Husayn, and his life was transformed. He saw the error of his ways, and took up a new life as an itinerant preacher for this new Faith, and eventually a martyr.
2. The Sifter of Wheat was a dreamer, one who had no time or attention for the things of this world. He loved music, he loved animals, he loved the forest. During the day he worked hard and sang, in the evening he went to his shack at the edge of the woods, where the animals visited him and were unafraid. When Mullá Husayn came to Isfahán and asked who might be ready for his Message, people said “Oh, ask the Sifter of Wheat if he is willing to believe in your crazy message about God’s Messenger returning to the world.” And he did.

Or take another part of his life:

3. The Sifter of Wheat avows his faith in the new Message, and sets off across Iran to defend his Faith. In each town he encounters different kinds of people – here a kindly old woman who believes the Message; there a set of thugs beat him, but maybe one secretly went back to visit him, and is converted; in a third place there are several students in a seminary who believe; he is driven out of the next place by the local preacher, but not before a youth decides to follow this Faith.

The Sifter of Wheat is such a wonderful character. He can be a peripheral character – passing through a town and touching someone with his simple words, and that person then learns a lesson of love and trust in God. Or there is someone who opposes his teaching, because the Sifter is too ignorant, or because this person is under the influence of someone who tells him the Sifter is wrong – such idealism is foolish, or Islám is the final religion. Or you can take him all the way to the fort of Shaykh Tabarsí, where so many Bábís lost their lives (although he is not mentioned in that story as having been there). Or maybe he was martyred just before arriving there. Or maybe he was given a task to stay alive and teach somewhere, and maybe he met Bahá'u'lláh, maybe he was in the Siyáh-Chál when the Blessed Beauty was granted the full power of His Revelation... so many possibilities, with this intriguing person about whom so little has been written.

Any children's class or adult Báhá'í class could be assigned the task of writing a story or a skit or to write a play together about these or other characters from this wonderful work. Experiment and create.

The Goal

What we aspire to in our devotions is to attain the station of “the people of Bahá”, which is that of the true believer, of whom has been revealed:

“In confirmation of the exalted rank of the true believer, referred to by Bahá'u'lláh, He reveals the following: "The station which he who hath truly recognized this Revelation will attain is the same as the one ordained for such prophets of the house of Israel as are not regarded as Manifestations `endowed with constancy.'”

-Shoghi Effendi, The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh, paragraph #33

“By the righteousness of God! Whoso openeth his lips in this Day and maketh mention of the name of his Lord, the hosts of Divine inspiration shall descend upon him from the heaven of My name, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise. On him shall also descend the Concourse on high, each bearing aloft a chalice of pure light. Thus hath it been foreordained in the realm of God's Revelation, by the behest of Him Who is the All-Glorious, the Most Powerful.”

-Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, #CXXIX

“O thou who art attracted to the Fragrances of God! Know thou that some of the souls who arrive at this Blessed Spot possess hearing, seeing and smelling; they see what no eye hath ever seen, they hear the melodies of the Dove of Holiness on the Tree of Life, they inhale the fragrances of God from this Garden, and they surely realize that, verily, this Blessed Spot is a center for pure seeing and strong hearing and is the direction from which the breezes of the Holy Spirit blow. But those who have neither seeing nor hearing apprehend nothing and say what they understand not. As to thee and thy daughter who is devoted to god, who presented herself, saw and heard: Know ye, verily, (one possessing) a pure insight is a servant to the people of Baha', but only the prudent can understand this. Know thou, verily, insight (or mental perception) seeth that which sight (or physical

perception) seeth not and apprehendeth that which the body perceiveth not, inasmuch as the sight seeth the mirage as water, the images pictured in the mirror as a reality and genuine, and it seeth the earth as stationary, the great stars as small. But the insight correcteth the mistake of the sight and apprehendeth the reality and seeth that the mirage is not water, that the images pictured in mirrors are naught else save mere reflections, that the earth is moving and the distant stars are great. Consequently, the truth of insight, its effectiveness and power is proven, as well as the weakness of sight, its inefficiency and defects. Then, know thou that the power of the Word of God is effective, both in the spirit and the body, and the influence of the spirit of god is predominant over the material as well as the essential and spiritual.”

-Tablets of ‘Abdu’l- Bahá, Vol. 3, pp. 607-8

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