

### 3. IMPRESSIONS OF A BAHÁ'Í YOUTH FROM A JOURNEY ROUND THE WORLD

By GREGORY C. DAHL

MANY experiences of life defy verbal expression, reaching as they do beyond the limits of thought and conception to deeper worlds of meaning and feeling. Perhaps the spiritual world will always be just beyond the full grasp of man. Certainly in this imperfect time, when our understanding of spiritual forces is so limited, if a Bahá'í is granted a close view of the power and enthralling beauty of his Faith—albeit only a momentary view as on pilgrimage or during some especially significant Bahá'í event—the experience is such as to strike wonder and amazement into the heart. It is as though we were riding with ease upon the sea, and only occasionally were immersed to feel the power of the deep currents and witness the beauty of the fish and coral which all the while exist beneath us. A journey round the world visiting Bahá'ís is this type of experience—a momentary glimpse of tremendous forces at work, an enthralling romance with the true significance of the age in which we live, and an influence on one's own soul which cannot be compared to other experiences of life.

It was my great privilege to be able to experience this type of service to the Faith in 1972 and 1973. Taking advantage of the international air travel rule allowing unlimited stops on a given ticket between distant cities without additional charge, and having saved my funds and planned my trip assiduously during two years in the military service, I was able to travel for a year and visit Bahá'ís in over fifty countries in the Pacific, Asia, Africa and Europe. It was a rapid journey, with too little time in each place to do much more than meet the friends, encourage them, bring news and pictures of Bahá'ís in other places, share some songs, and take pictures. In fact for me it was rather like an audio-visual show, with scenes of tremendous drama and significance appearing briefly before me, only to be flashed away and to be replaced by others. But how can one express the preciousness of those brief moments, those vanishing experiences? Somehow Bahá'ís

have a way of establishing themselves in one's heart and soul after only a few minutes or hours of friendship. And after all, many of the Bahá'ís that a travelling Bahá'í meets, stays with and gets to know, will be remembered by history as the great souls of the age—far more distinguished than the statesmen, industrial leaders and famous personalities of a dying order! The experiences of pioneering and sacrifice in the path of God have purified and spiritualized many a Bahá'í hero in the field, bringing forth some of the jewels of our time. How often was I reminded of Bahá'u'lláh's words: "... *fellowship with the righteous cleanseth the rust from off the heart*"!

Several general impressions remain with me from that trip, which I would like to try to express here. One is the tremendous growth and maturity of the Faith in recent years. We are all familiar with the statistics of the rapid expansion of our Faith; but what these statistics really mean is generally beyond our range of experience. Thus, to see the Faith functioning and growing in country after country, in islands and continents, in regions at war and those in peace, in democracies and kingdoms—literally every place that airplanes fly (and of course many others besides!)—was indeed breathtaking. It used to be that when international travellers set out to spread the Word of God for this age, they felt like lonely lights in dark regions, breaking new paths where no fellow-believers had trod before. For Americans and Persians this experience has become especially deep-rooted in our attitudes and expectations, since we sent out so many pioneers during the years of geographical expansion of our Faith. Now, however, one can travel to what seem the remotest parts of the earth, and find oneself welcomed at the airport or station by a representative of the national or local Assembly, and put immediately under their care and supervision. No longer is there an area of the world accessible to westerners that is not under the jurisdiction of properly



Suhs, a Ponapean Bahá'í youth (left) return from a teach-



A Bahá'í teacher training institute.

## YOUTH FROM THE WORLD

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*Suhs, a Ponapean Bahá'í youth (left) with visiting Bahá'í teacher, Greg Dahl (right) on their return from a teaching trip to villages in Ponape, Micronesia.*



*A Bahá'í teacher training institute held in a public school building in a village in southern Korea.*



*Bahá'í youth at the National Haziratu'l-Quds, Singapore. Govindan, a Malaysian youth pioneer, is seen second from the left.*

constituted Bahá'í administrative bodies, and the Bahá'í traveler is no longer an agent acting alone, but rather a part of a vast system of administration and teaching that girdles the globe. Indeed, these relatively new developments pose an interesting and vital challenge to the Bahá'í traveler, since he must continually find the balance between seeking the advice and guidance of local administrative bodies, which often requires considerable patience from hurried westerners, and independently offering suggestions and examples of successes in other places, which sometimes are timely and of great value, and at other times are ill-conceived and poorly suited to the local circumstances in a new place. Naturally a visitor has much to offer in perspective, diverse experience and enthusiasm which is of great value to Bahá'í communities he visits; but since these communities are now maturing in their own right, he must adjust his approach to harmonize with local efforts, and his plans must be screened and modified by administrative institutions more familiar than he is with local needs and problems. Bahá'í administration is beginning to come of age around the globe.

Oftentimes, as I observed this phenomenon in operation, I thought that Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings and especially His administrative order were like a vast sketch of a magnificent scene which He had left us—but without the colors filled in. Slowly, as various nationalities entered the Faith in force, we acquired new colors to fill in parts of the painting. For a long time only two or three colors were available, and so the painting was necessarily spotty and incomplete. Now, however, most of mankind is substantially represented in Bahá'í administration, and the richness and fullness of the painting in full color are beginning to be apparent. In time the splendor and completeness of this painting of Bahá'u'lláh's will astonish mankind.

Indeed, the achievement of the Faith in reaching all the various races and peoples of the earth is no accident; and watching this process has been for me a vivid and instructive contrast to the processes of division and polarization so evident in the world. The general law of human behaviour has always been that those who once get ahead have the power and resources to get farther ahead, so that enormous



*Humá Şubhání of Persia (left) and Akale, in Yaoundé, Cameroon, pro...*

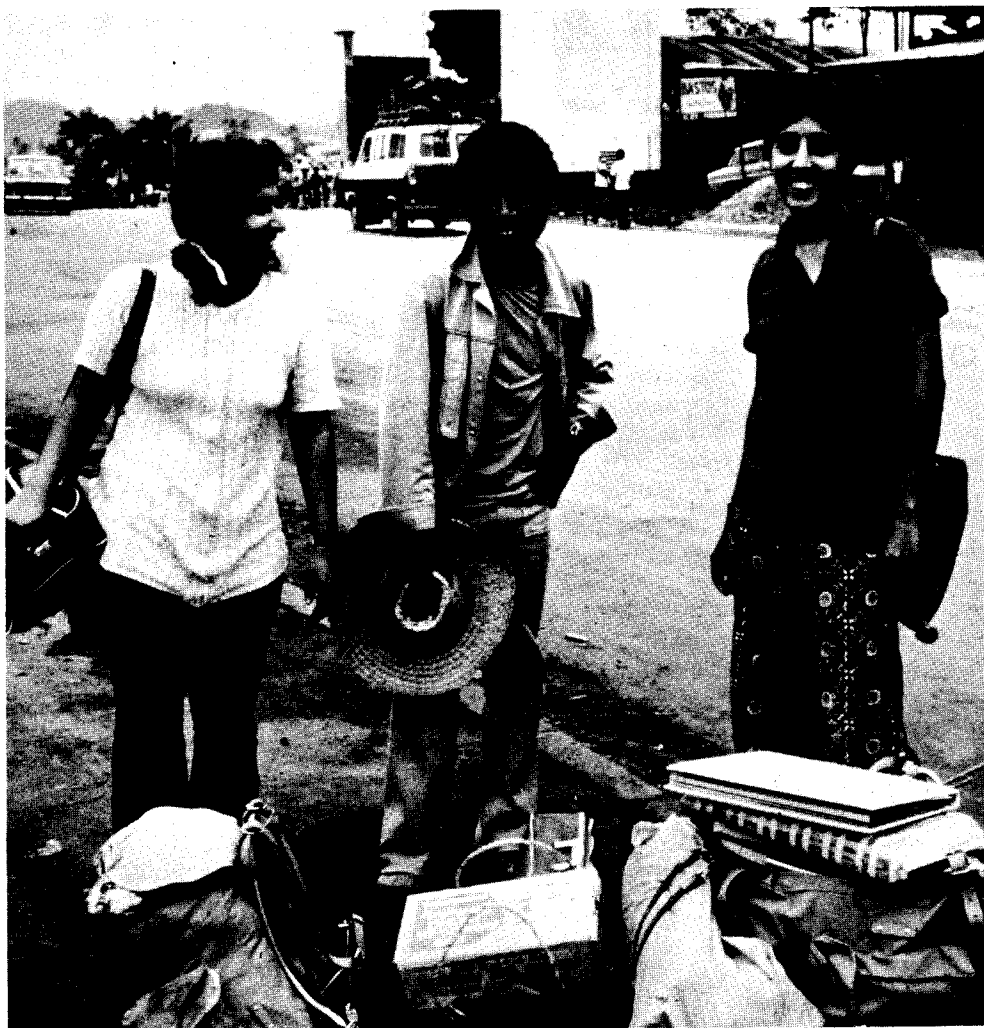
disparities of opportunity and well created between men. For an American world and the incredible lack of facing most of mankind is a tremen in the absurd inequities of our especially so for the Bahá'í traveler frequently stays (if he wishes) with hosts, sharing the living conditions of the place he is visiting. How does to one's Bahá'í brother and close friend or Fiji that an American youth could his military pay in two years enough



Govindan, a Malaysian youth on the left.

times, as I observed this phenomenon of integration, I thought that Bahá'u'lláh's teachings and especially His administrative arrangements were like a vast sketch of a magnificent painting which He had left us—but without the colors. Slowly, as various nationalities joined in the Faith in force, we acquired new colors to fill in parts of the painting. For a long time only two or three colors were available, so the painting was necessarily spotty and incomplete. Now, however, most of mankind is being represented in Bahá'í administration, and the richness and fullness of the painting in full color are beginning to be apparent. In time the splendor and completeness of the painting of Bahá'u'lláh's will astonish us.

And, the achievement of the Faith in all the various races and peoples of the world is no accident; and watching this process has been for me a vivid and instructive lesson into the processes of division and polarization evident in the world. The general law of human behaviour has always been that those who get ahead have the power and resources to get farther ahead, so that enormous



*Humá Şubháni of Persia (left) and Parvin Bihi of India (right) with homefront teacher Samuel Akale, in Yaoundé, Cameroon, preparing to depart on a teaching journey of several weeks to northern Cameroon and Chad.*

disparities of opportunity and well-being are created between men. For an American accustomed to affluence and easy living, to see the world and the incredible lack of opportunity facing most of mankind is a tremendous lesson in the absurd inequities of our time. This is especially so for the Bahá'í traveler, who frequently stays (if he wishes) with his Bahá'í hosts, sharing the living conditions of the people of the place he is visiting. How does one explain to one's Bahá'í brother and close friend in India or Fiji that an American youth can save from his military pay in two years enough to finance

a year's world tour? It seems impossible to them! Indeed, it seems impossible that such differences can continue in the world. And yet, the Bahá'í system works on opposite principles. The Bahá'í community or individual who gets ahead is immediately expected to share its success with others through the sending of pioneers, circulation of travel teachers, or contribution of funds. For example, Malaysia was still stunned, at the time of my visit, by the fact that they had achieved such a sudden and unexpected expansion during the Nine Year Plan that they had been quickly asked to pro-

vide pioneers and assistance to nearby Asian countries and to Africa. They were still accustomed to thinking in terms of receiving assistance rather than giving it! It is in this way that the natural tendency toward inequalities that is inherent in the human condition has been moderated among Bahá'ís with a process of sharing, producing a sense of harmony, co-operation and family feeling that is in stark contrast to the animosities and distrust of nations and peoples. I was repeatedly astounded at how well and naturally my Bahá'í hosts in foreign lands, including villagers and struggling but impoverished families, accepted and welcomed me as their brother and Bahá'í comrade, despite my cameras, tape recorder, pictures, guitar, self-ironing shirts and other Western paraphernalia. Theirs was the much greater "culture shock", I'm sure!

Another aspect of the international development of the Faith which impressed me deeply was the interconnectedness and global scope of the Bahá'í administrative institutions I worked with so closely during my travels. My

very first experience on the trip will illustrate the marvelous workings of this system. Shortly before I was due to depart from California for the South Pacific, word was received from the Continental Pioneer Committee in Australia, whose area extended over the Pacific, that a routing through Tahiti rather than through Hawaii would cost me no more and would be of greater value for the Faith. Unfortunately, however, an address for Bahá'ís in Tahiti was not available in the U.S. So an air letter was sent back to the Committee in Australia, with only a few days notice. This committee cabled the appropriate National Assembly, in New Caledonia (3,000 miles distant from Tahiti), who in turn cabled Bahá'ís in Tahiti, and these Bahá'ís met me at the airport! Meanwhile the World Centre was informed and a cable reached me in California with an address in case other efforts should fail. Thus the cable had circled the globe and the visitor was able to connect with Bahá'ís in a small island in the South Pacific. Indeed, we Bahá'ís often think of ourselves as inefficient because our standards are

so high, but my experience has been the international operation of the Faith to rival the largest and best organizations on the face of the globe. In other organization could summon thousands and personnel to arrange to have a meeting and welcomed by a *native* in virtue of the support of the world (as I was welcomed in the first fourteen countries I visited), in the example, Funafuti Atoll in the South Pacific which has a population of 10,000. And our Bahá'í administrative personnel are not highly paid, well-trained employees of those of governments and corporations. The only reward is the privilege of serving the Faith.

I cannot leave this subject without a tribute to the Institution of the Boards of Counsellors, with whom I have the privilege of working closely. This is yet another sign of the maturation and strength of the Cause. Travelling so intimately familiar, from years of experience with the peoples, cultures, and Boards of their areas, the Counsellors have a touch with the needs and problems of the Faith, and offer unparalleled an-



*Partial view of the audience at the Bahá'í Youth Conference, Padova, Italy; summer, 1972.*

experience on the trip will illustrate the glorious workings of this system. Shortly after I was due to depart from California for the Pacific, word was received from the local Pioneer Committee in Australia, that a steamer extended over the Pacific, that a route through Tahiti rather than through the Panama Canal would cost me no more and would be of great value for the Faith. Unfortunately, I had no address for Bahá'ís in Tahiti was available in the U.S. So an air letter was sent to the Committee in Australia, with only a few days notice. This committee cabled the appropriate National Assembly, in New York, a (3,000 miles distant from Tahiti), and they in turn cabled Bahá'ís in Tahiti, and these Bahá'ís met me at the airport! Meanwhile the local Centre was informed and a cable reached California with an address in case other routes would fail. Thus the cable had circled the globe and the visitor was able to connect with Bahá'ís in a small island in the South Pacific. Indeed, we Bahá'ís often think of our system as inefficient because our standards are

so high, but my experience has been that the international operation of the Faith is such as to rival the largest and best organized organizations on the face of the globe. Indeed, what other organization could summon the resources and personnel to arrange to have a visitor met and welcomed by a *native* in virtually any airport of the world (as I was welcomed in the first fourteen countries I visited), including, for example, Funafuti Atoll in the middle of the Pacific which has a population of perhaps 500. And our Bahá'í administrative personnel are not highly paid, well-trained employees, like those of governments and corporations. Their only reward is the privilege of service.

I cannot leave this subject without paying a tribute to the Institution of the Continental Boards of Counsellors, with whom I had the privilege of working closely. This Institution is yet another sign of the maturation and growing strength of the Cause. Travelling widely, each intimately familiar, from years of experience with the peoples, cultures, and Bahá'í history of their areas, the Counsellors are in perfect touch with the needs and problems of the Faith, and offer unparalleled and invaluable

guidance and advice to the Bahá'í travelling teacher. Well I remember the problems of communication and planning that had to be surmounted when I visited Bolivia in 1967, before there were Counsellors. Today those difficulties are no longer, and indeed there is no obscure or forgotten region of the world for Bahá'ís!

Naturally Bahá'ís still struggle in many parts of the world for basic freedom of worship, for recognition of the Faith as an independent religion, for property rights, or for acceptance among a particular people or group not yet represented. But discouraging and insurmountable as these difficulties may seem to the Bahá'ís immediately involved, it is clear to the Bahá'í fortunate enough to travel that the world community of Bahá'ís is immensely strong and resourceful, with firm bonds of unity and communication linking the tens of thousands of Bahá'í centers that cover the globe, and that increasingly the local communities will benefit and draw strength and support from this diverse world-wide community that Bahá'u'lláh, with His unerring vision, knew would be the necessary instrument for the redemption of the world.



Padua, Italy; summer, 1972.