



Children's Story – The Black Prince, a story from Egypt as told by Laura Simms, from “Ready to Tell Tales: Sure-Fire Stories from America’s Favorite Storytellers,” eds. David Holt and Bill Mooney

Reading - <http://www.upliftingwords.org/poetry/Promise.htm>

Sermon

A few days ago I got an email from Avaaz.org, which calls itself “a global web movement to bring people-powered politics to decision-making everywhere.” I get a lot of emails from them. I’ve learned that when you’re the kind of person who is willing to click to send letters to this representative or that representative, you end up on a lot of other lists that ask you to click for a lot of other things! This week I clicked for Planned Parenthood, Wisconsin, marriage equality, and the people of Libya. How many of you have become regular clickers! I really think there should be a Facebook app to be able to see who your friends clicked for! What might we learn about each other if we could see what we care enough about to let our name stand for it.

So in this email from Avaaz, their focus was on keeping the world connected to what is going on in Libya. When protests broke out in Egypt, the government responded by shutting down cell phone and internet connections, so that the protesters wouldn’t be able to connect with the outside world. What oppressive governments fear most is being witnessed and what they fear second most is their people feeling like they have power. The inability of Egypt to sever the connection is part of what brought down Mubarak. The crowds in Cairo knew that the world was watching, and this strengthened them to continue their marches, day after day after day.

So now, Libya is trying what Egypt tried and non-profit organizations like Avaaz are trying to ensure that this cut off does not happen. This is what they wrote in their email: **Avaaz is working urgently to "blackout-proof" the protests** -- with secure satellite modems and phones, tiny video cameras, and portable radio transmitters, plus expert support teams on the ground -- to enable activists to **broadcast live video feeds even during internet and phone blackouts** and ensure the oxygen of international attention fuels their courageous movements for change.

Did you have any idea how important your eyes are? Did you know that your eyes are the oxygen for change? Our attention has power. So that’s what we’re called to do, pay attention and let the world know we are watching. So when you get those emails inviting you to click for Libyan freedom, do it, because your click is registered, and people are putting their lives on the line so their world meets your eyes.

So what does this have to do with the Baha’i faith? Actually, in our interconnected world, more than you can imagine, but we have to go back in history to mid-19th century Iran to learn why.

As many of us know, the Middle East has a love hate relationship with the West, and this isn’t something that just started in recent years, it started a long time ago, more than 1000 years ago, when Europeans invaded the Middle East during the Crusades, bringing an exclusionary Christianity to bear upon the largely Muslim population. Not a great way to start a relationship. Then, when Europe became the dominant political power in the world and began colonizing as much of the world as possible, it was seen as an occupier. Britain, France, Holland, Spain, Portugal, Russia - everyone wanted their piece of the world pie. This caused a lot of resentment, but also a massive exchange of ideas. Britain, for instance, was the biggest world power by the 1800s. It had many colonies. But it was also the first democracy in the world and even though it had no

intention of bringing democracy to the countries it ruled, the people they colonized weren't stupid. They came to learn these new ways and wanted them for themselves. But these were the occupiers' ideas, and that's where the love/hate relationship comes in. Why would you want to emulate your enemy, the one who has made you into a second class citizen and used your country for its own selfish purposes?

In the 1800s, Iran wasn't controlled by a European power. It was its own country, but it was ruled by the Qajar dynasty, Iran's royal family, and they worked to insulate Iran from European influence by keeping everything European out, and that included art, literature, philosophy, music, and the concept of democracy. It was supported in this by Shi'ite Muslim leaders. Church and state were one unified thing. The Qajar dynasty was seen as divinely ordained and Muslim leaders exercised political control by supporting it. But there were always little groups that popped up, here and there, that tried to test the boundaries, that tried to bring in new ideas and ways of doing things, and they were usually shut down.

Well, one day, in 1844, a man by the name of Mirza Ali Muhammad announced that the 12th imam was going to show himself and that all Muslims should prepare for a new revelation. Mirza called himself the Bab, or the gate. And what he meant by the 12th imam was this. In Shi'ite Islam, they believe that there has been a series of imams that are directly connected to the Prophet Muhammad. Eleven of those imams have showed themselves. The 12th imam is hidden and someday will be revealed, and when he shows himself, it will be at the end of time to initiate an era of peace and justice. For the Bab to announce the coming of the 12th imam was a big deal. Now what do you think the Qajar dynasty and the Shia Muslim leaders thought about the possibility of a 12th imam showing up and bringing peace and justice? Did they get themselves ready to welcome him with open arms?

Not a chance. Islam in Iran had become the tool of empire. What would this 12th imam think of that empire? They weren't going to wait to find out. In 1851, when it became clear that the Bab was gaining a lot of converts, they declared him a heretic, put him to death and, threw many of his followers in prison, including one of the leading Babis, Bahauallah, which literally means "He Whom God Shall Manifest." They hoped this would break the Baha'is. That was not to be. In 1852, Bahauallah received a vision that he was the 12th imam, and the theology that developed through his revelations focused on the unity of humanity and the unity of God, and what this theology said to the Qajar dynasty was, you are not God. You are not the highest power. What this theology said to the Shi'ite leaders was this: you are also not God. Your hierarchy is not God. There is a unity higher than you and bigger than you. Baha'i theology directly challenged the Qajar dynasty and what had become of Islam, and set itself up as the new highest revelation.

In many ways, Bahauallah's vision was not unlike that of a poor young boy sitting on a white stone wall playing the flute for a princess. He felt the Muslim faith had traded in its true self to become a cruel and relentless warrior. If you were here for last week's sermon on Islam, you will recall that the revelations of Muhammad were a direct challenge to the love affair his people were having with wealth and power. Islam was born as a direct response to self-centeredness and pride. By Bahauallah's time, many felt Islam had been corrupted, a wolf in sheep's clothing, and that the lofty concept of submission to the one God had become instead submission to the selfish desires of an oppressive regime and a religious hierarchy. With Bahauallah's proclamation that all of humanity was one and that the one God was in all faiths, and that we are all equal under that one God, he proclaimed the dangerously democratic idea that it should be possible for a poor boy with a flute to marry a princess, because when you put love first instead of pride and power, all the things of this world that corrupt and divide us will be no more.

Not surprisingly, the religious and political leaders would have loved to put Bahauallah to death as they did with the Bab. But Bahauallah was smart. He built relationships with world rulers and brought the eyes of the world onto Iran. The most Iran leaders dared was to send him into exile, which was no picnic, but it also allowed him to build larger networks of allies. When he died, his son, Abdul-Baha, became the new leader and he travelled

to Egypt, Europe and America and developed a huge correspondence with world leaders. Iran has never stopped persecuting Baha'i's, but it has to be careful, because the world is always watching. The oxygen of international attention is always present because the Baha'is in Iran have a huge click list.

This is what I wonder. What is it about the act of witnessing that is so powerful? How does it have the power to save lives and strengthen spirits and change the course of history? I think of all the footage we saw from Egypt in these past two months, and how the crowds pressed in on the journalists. Why did they need to be seen? What did they hope to accomplish?

Maybe the same thing we hope to accomplish when we post our status updates on Facebook! "This is what is happening with my life. This is what I care about. This is what I'm thinking about. This is what I'm reading. This is a video I've seen, come look at it. Check out this website! Please let it be the case that I am real to you and that you see in me the spark of the divine that is in all things." Facebook is all about being witnessed and witnessing to others. It's like we gain form and meaning and value in watching and being watched. Being seen is oxygen.

Essentially, this was the goal of the newly emerging Baha'i faith, to make humanity more real and ultimately, sacred, to itself. It was about a sacred witnessing to the fullness of humanity, the kind of witnessing that would change you forever. Listen, it said. God is everywhere and in everything except in the divisions that we erect between us. When you see, truly see, the God in everything and everyone, how can you create those divisions? How can you separate the wealthy from the poor? How can you separate woman from man? How can you separate brown from white from yellow from red from black? How can you close yourself off from the wisdom and truth of other lands? Welcome it all and you will see and be transformed by the unfathomable beauty of the most high. Under the leadership of Bahauallah, then Abdul-Baha, and then his son Shoghi Effendi, the Baha'i faith came to proclaim that the natural evolution of humankind was towards one humanity unified under the loving truth of the one mysterious God that had revealed his will through their prophet.

So now, the streets continue to fill in Egypt, Libya, Iran, Bahrain, Yemen, Tunisia, and Morocco. It is possible, I hope, that a true democracy can emerge in some of these countries, a democracy that might actually work, unlike the democracies the west has tried to force on the Middle East. But as the streets fill, the governments of China and North Korea and other oppressive regimes are nervous and have made preparations should anything similar happen in their own countries. Our eyes need to be ready to witness. I also think it is not inappropriate to bring to light those who stand in the streets of Wisconsin. No guns are drawn, it is unlikely any lives will be lost, but the stakes are high. I wonder if Americans have the same endurance as the Egyptians. Will they be able to return to the streets day after day, and will the crowds grow and strengthen or in characteristic 21st century American form, will our short attention spans quickly shift elsewhere?

What will you do, what will we do with the oxygen of our attention?

Time will tell.

Amen and blessed be.