

**RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS FROM SHERENE DEVID-FARAG
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- **Can you explain your view and thoughts on the concept of artistic expression?**

As a young person I used to wonder why music had such a profound effect on me, or why I could be so moved and inspired by nature – the ocean, the mountains, beautiful gardens, the falling leaves in New England, forests... After becoming a Baha'i in University I began to read the quite astounding and copious Baha'i Writings on so many subjects, including some on the concept of artistic expression, and at that point a great adventure and discovery began, and continues until today.

There are a number of statements in the Baha'i writings exalting the station of the arts: "It is natural for the heart and spirit to take pleasure and enjoyment in all things that show forth symmetry, harmony and perfection. For instance: a beautiful house, a well designed garden, a symmetrical line, a graceful action, a well written book, pleasing garments – in fact, all things that have in themselves grace or beauty are pleasing to the heart and spirit..." [*Abdu'l-Baha, The Importance of the Arts in Promoting the Faith, no. 24, p. 11*].

Artistic expression manifests itself in so many forms. On becoming a Baha'i, I was delighted to see such a clear explanation of the strong connection between art and the spiritual nature of man. Over the years, as we lived in different parts of the world, and became involved in different cultures, it became clear that the spirit of man, through whatever medium or material was in the local/regional environment – would come alive through artistic expression; sometimes it was through working with wood, or leather, or clay, or straw, or local beads, or hand-woven materials, brass, iron, and as a result, musical instruments and drums, jewelry, paintings, sculptures, tapestries were all produced in the most astounding variety of matter, patterns, colors sizes and shapes.

Throughout the world, no matter the culture, the language, the economic or political situation – man’s spirit was shining through, his desire for beauty, for melody, for rhythm, for refinement, for delicacy, for upliftment, were all coming through in a marvelous diversity of self-expression.

‘Abdu’l-Baha states: “All Art is a gift of the Holy Spirit. When this light shines through the mind of a musician, it manifests itself in beautiful harmonies. Again, shining through the mind of a poet, it is seen in fine poetry and poetic prose. When the Light of the Sun of Truth inspires the mind of a painter, he produces marvelous pictures. These gifts are fulfilling their highest purpose when showing forth the praise of God.” [*Abdu’l-Baha, The Importance of the Arts in Promoting the Faith, no. 23, pp. 10-11*]

- **Why is artistic expression so important? How would you explain this to a mother from the neighborhood?**

Artistic expression is extremely important as it clearly has the power to uplift the spirit of human beings, to ease our sorrow, to act as a balm to our sufferings, to bring joy into our lives, and offers a means through which we can share joy with one another. For example, we read “Singing melodies will bring animation and happiness to the world of humanity, the hearers will be delighted and joyful and their deeper emotions stirred.” [*Abdu’l-Baha, The Importance of the Arts in Promoting the Faith, no. 10, p. 6*]. These are extremely important concepts of which mothers need to be aware as they provide for the training and development of the characters of their children.

The following is quite a stunning quotation about the potential of music to influence the lives of children, and I would certainly share it with mothers in any neighborhood. It states: “Through the power and charm of music the spirit of man is uplifted. It has wonderful sway and effect in the hearts of children, for their hearts are pure, and melodies have great influence in them. The latent talents with which the hearts of these children are endowed will find expression through the medium of music. Therefore, you must exert yourselves to make them proficient; teach them to sing with excellence and effect...” [*Abdu’l-Baha, The Promulgation of Universal Peace (1982 ed.), p 52.*] It is my personal hope

that in the future people will do serious research on these quotations, produce PhDs and other studies in order to better understand the mysterious connection and relationship between singing and artistic expression, the hearts of children and the potential development of their latent talents later on in their lives...

- **How does a setting like a summer school promote artistic expression? Was there something you found really interesting?**

The inclusion of music in a Summer School's program can have a striking influence on the spirit of the week. In De Poort I was impressed that each day started off with prayers and music -- but not just a few songs, rather, a good fifteen to twenty minutes of animated singing, with good musicians accompanying the singing of over one hundred people of all ages. The words were projected onto a screen so everyone could follow, and the songs selected had obviously been written over several generations, and came from different continents.

This meant that the children, the junior youth, the youth, the parents and the grandparents were all somewhat familiar with, or learning songs from, each others' generations and from different areas of the world. They loved singing together – the mood was energetic, sometimes more spiritual, sometimes bordering on boisterous. These morning music sessions sent people off to class energized spiritually, in a positive and animated frame of mind. And they started their days as one united group, in spite of the differences of age and culture, demonstrating how the power of music could lift their spirits, as into one soul in many bodies.

I have been reflecting quite a bit on these De Poort singing sessions, and feel the friends in the Netherlands are extremely fortunate that music is such an integral part of the school. I understood that this has been going on for decades now, and feel that it must have had a subtle but strong influence in helping to build a unified community, to create an atmosphere and learning environment that continues to attract three generations of people from diverse backgrounds back to the school, summer after summer.

The diversity of the music present was also indicative of the varied backgrounds and open attitudes of the friends. Imagine my joy during my first week, when, sitting out on the patio, I suddenly heard the strains of a double bass coming from somewhere, and then an accordion. Friends had brought their instruments and were sharing their music during the afternoon break between classes. A fine violinist appeared a few days later, and in the second week a gifted cellist arrived, plus there was a group of people who formed a chorale under the direction of one of the friends, rehearsing throughout the week and performing at the end.

The morning line-up was also impressive in its own way, with two, three and four guitars and ukuleles, drums, keyboard players and a bevy of children, juniors and adults to lead the singing. During the day one would have the opportunity to hear all kinds of folk and country music in the mornings, then on to informal Roma (Gypsy) and classical music spontaneously performed outside on the patio, or in the hallway of the main building when it was too hot outside. Some afternoons you could hear the sounds of the choir practicing. The evenings often had musical contributions, sometimes of a profoundly spiritual nature, with musical settings of prayers and Holy Writings, including the beautiful chanting of prayers in Arabic and Persian by friends from the East.

- **Can you give examples of artistic expressions that really made you enthusiastic? (These can also be experiences from around the world)**

I have been deeply moved by various musical experiences I have had in different Baha'i communities. As an example, up in the hills of **Papua New Guinea**, after travelling for days by sea and land, the tired friends opened their large institutional gathering with the most beautiful three and four part harmony singing, so very touching that I was moved to tears. When it was my turn to speak, as a representative from the Baha'i World Centre, all I could do was to sing back to them, beautiful songs from the Congo, from South Africa, from Haiti and so forth.

Another time a **National Spiritual Assembly in Africa** opened our joint consultations by singing deeply moving settings of the Holy Word, again

in harmony. It lifted the spirit of our meeting significantly, before a word of consultation on any subject had been uttered.

In another instance, the junior youth (11 to 14 year olds) in the war-torn area of **Eastern Congo** sang for those of us assembled for quite a large gathering of the friends from the Kivus. I was stunned to learn through the translator that they had memorized and set to music the opening paragraph of the latest message from our world-governing body, all about the beautifully restored Shrine of the Báb that radiates out over the Mediterranean, from the side of Mount Carmel in Haifa, Israel. Once again, when I had the honor of attending meetings in **Vietnam**, I was amazed to hear the youth singing one of my very early songs, written decades before, translated into Vietnamese, as part of the opening ceremony. What a privilege! At the dedication almost two years ago, of the final continental House of Worship in **Chile**, I had the bounty of singing in their choir, practicing for several days ahead of time, in Spanish, with friends gathered from all over Latin America and a few other countries. What joy! Even now, two years later, the What's Ap group of the choir continues, so strong was the bonding that took place at that time.

If and when one has the opportunity to engage with people around the world in this kind of spiritual communication and exchange through artistic expression, hearts are warmed, spirits are lifted; one feels humbled, thankful to be alive to have such experiences. Backgrounds and differences don't matter so much any more – it is the souls that are moved and communicating.

- **Do you also encourage artistic expression in the community where you live?**

For sure. Just today we have been consulting by email about what the musicians in our area can do as we plan for the Twin Holy Days in November 2018, and how this will prepare us to do even more for the Bicentennial event a year later, in November 2019. After all, some of the recent guidance we received from the Baha'i World Centre about these occasions states: "As plans for the next bicentenary take shape, there will doubtless begin to emerge many examples of artistic expression

arising from a profound reflection on the appearance above the horizon of the world, in quick succession, of two Manifestations of God, and the implications for the life of humanity.” [*The Universal House of Justice, Message of 1 June 2018 “To All National Spiritual Assemblies”*]. We can’t just sit still. How can any of us who are artistically inclined not be inspired to arise and create something for this historic occasion?

- **How can we encourage more artistic expression in our communities?**

Perhaps by encouraging each other, more than ever before, to share one another’s gifts; by inviting and welcoming, for example, visiting musicians from another community for an evening of music, songs and refreshments with one’s friends; by organizing a simple but beautiful art exhibit in a public place where not only are artistic creations on display, but where there is also an explanation of why and how each piece was created, demonstrating the inspirational aspect of it all; by including children in everything – having their artistic creations on display, having them sing and perform, maybe along with some junior youth, youth or adults to support them; by sharing, either in our homes in a private setting, or in a public theatre, the wonderful films we now have at our disposal, providing concrete proof for all to see of our growing and vibrant communities world-wide?

In general, I feel we need to be more courageous, to speak out more, share the joy and love in our communities, give hope, to reach out to those tired of contention, to those who are anxious, worried about the future of our world, and to assure them that there is hope, that there is a wonderful and unfolding Plan, that God has not forsaken us.

And the arts have a direct role in all this. We read “The day will come when the Cause will spread like wildfire when its spirit and teachings will be presented on the stage or in art and literature as a whole. Art can better awaken such noble sentiments than cold rationalizing, especially among the mass of the people.” [*Shoghi Effendi, quoted in the “Message from the Universal House of Justice to the Baha’is of the World” – 21 April, 1996.*]

- **Is there something else you would like to share?**

Perhaps I could share my feeling that we need to encourage all who are artistically inclined to work hard at developing their talent and gifts (not just dabble), to share them as appropriate, to be like the hollow reed through which spiritual qualities can flow to others, consciously suppressing the ego to make way for a purer, more inspiring message to be conveyed to others.

Judgment is needed. As the Founder of our faith says: “We, verily, have made music as a ladder for your souls, a means whereby they may be lifted up unto the realm on high; make it not, therefore, as wings to self and passion. Truly, We are loath to see you numbered with the foolish.”
[Baha’u’llah, The Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Verse 51]

J. Lincoln
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