



Concourse United – 7, Old World Wanderers – 0

Play up and play the game!

IT WAS THE LAST DAY of the football season and if my team could get a better result than another team then they would be promoted to a higher division. I was too nervous to look at Ceefax for the latest score. I decided not to look until the end when it would all be over.

Just before half time I decided to take my mind off things with a stroll down to the local hardware store. Probably to buy screws for one of the many jobs I will get round to one day. It was a fatal mistake. As I entered the shop the radio was announcing that if things stay the way they are then my team would be promoted. It raised my hopes but I would be devastated if they lost the chance in the next three quarters of an hour. As it turned out they did get promoted and as for the other team, well they won through in the play-offs.

Why on earth am I relating this inner madness? Why am I owning up to an involuntary gladness or sadness every Saturday at five o'clock in the football season? Because it is one of the attachments I can think of that is internalised within me and I have no control over. No matter how much I rationalise with myself that it is only a game I cannot change the feelings I experience when the team succeeds or fails and it begs the question, how did it get there?

I think I know what the building blocks were that led to this sorry slavery. One of my fondest, early childhood memories was going to watch my father play for his work's team, the "Body Makers", the intriguing name of the team of men who made the bodies of railway engines in Swindon railway works. I didn't actually watch, I just ran around and played football with other sons. I was very proud of him and loved to go anywhere with him.

When I was about six he would take me to watch Swindon at the County Ground. I was too young to have the faintest idea what was happening on the pitch but I was with my Dad and there was always a cup of tea and a Mars bar at half time. At that stage football was not a game or even an interest, it was a series of happy outings.

Later we moved to Burnley and as I became old enough to attend matches alone (about nine years old in those heady far off "stranger danger" free days!) I gave my allegiance to Burnley. Almost every week, reserve games as well, early enough at Turf Moor to open the gates, swathed in five feet of thick-wool, home knitted claret and blue scarf and bobble hat and carrying an enormous, loud rattle – the love affair started. It was sustained by the identity and credence my devotion and knowledge gave me with my peers. In essence my need to know how Burnley got on, that tense May day, had sprung from my love for my Dad, bonding with the adult males in my family and the identity supporting the team gave me with my peers in my formative years.

This silly state of nerves on a sunny afternoon made me think about what else was internalised within me and where did that come from? I got religion in almost the same way I got football. It was a family thing. The whole family were Methodists,

grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins and going to chapel on Sunday was an enjoyable family outing. It was expected, no questions asked. The reality of Jesus and God became internalised. Moral behaviour was based partly on a fear of letting one or the other down and partly on the example set by all the adults in my circle of experience. I could no more disbelieve in God than I could pretend to be cheerful following a Burnley defeat.

I remember talking to some children in a children's class at a national Bahá'í event in Ipswich. The children were from all parts of the country and we were discussing how difficult it can be sometimes, being the only Bahá'í child in a school. Something I said struck a chord.

I proposed the idea that being the only Bahá'í child can be a bit like being the supporter of a team languishing in the lower divisions. All the other kids support Manchester United even though Manchester is many miles away and they have never been there. But then, suddenly, your team hits a winning patch and after a few years rises up the divisions and now everyone wants to buy their shirts and sing their praises. But you were there first. You were there all the time, loyal through bad times and good and deep inside that will make you so happy. The same thing will happen to the Bahá'í Faith, I told them, and every one will want to support it, but you were there first. You were there in lean times when no one understood what you were trying to say and you never gave up. That will bring you untold happiness. After a brief silence one of the boys said, "That's exactly what happened to me with Newcastle United!"

Recently I had the privilege of being in a public meeting that had seven enquirers. It was part of a series of public meetings that have been, and hopefully will continue to be, very successful; partly due to the quality of the speakers, partly due to the lively singing that goes on, partly due to the efforts of people to bring friends and colleagues, partly due to the comfortable setting and the relaxed cake and tea session after the talk and songs, partly due to the belief that the Bahá'ís in the area have that they are being assisted by those recently departed, partly due to decades of hard work, dedication, perseverance, prayer, yearning and supporting the side when times were bad. These were not casual enquirers. These were people who were spiritually searching and were finding answers in the beauty of Bahá'u'lláh's life and teachings, in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's explanations and in the love the Bahá'ís have for each other.

The faces of the enquirers became transfixed as the speaker, brilliantly sensitive to their needs, unveiled the obvious truth that all religions, in essence, are one, and the Bahá'í Faith is the next chapter in the continually evolving and unfolding story.

As a spectator to this event a feeling of happiness and victory welled up, a feeling that had its roots in family, chapel and Turf Moor terraces (a new set of terraces thrill now but that's another story). It was a feeling of happiness that could not be suppressed and over which I had no control.

The Concourse on High had put seven past the shaky defence of Old World. It was a victory to savour. I can't wait for the next encounter. The crowd are already chanting (from both worlds) "We're going up!"

Kevin Beint

