

My Beloved Coloured Brother: Louis Gregory

by John Chesley

January 25, 1999

Approved for performance by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada, October 15, 1998.

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Introduction

The historical record shows Mr. Gregory was actively engaged for most of his life (from the age of 37 to his death at 77) in teaching the Bahá'í Faith throughout the United States and Canada primarily focussing on promoting a cardinal principle of the Bahá'í Faith -- the Oneness of Humankind and the unity and harmony between all races and peoples.¹ Indeed, Mr. Gregory was a giant in the whole area of race relations in the example of his personal life, his tireless work in this field, the number and capacity of people he reached with this message, the period of history in which he was active (Born: 1874 Died: 1951), and the geographic part of the world which was his focus -- America -- where success or failure would, as `Abdu'l-Bahá, said, would have impacts for the entire world. Mr. Gregory regularly taught courses at Green Acre School in Eliot, Maine in the summer on the topics of racial unity - the setting for part of the play.

¹ "In every Dispensation," writes `Abdu'l-Bahá, "the light of Divine Guidance has been focussed upon one central theme.... In this wondrous Revelation, this glorious century, the foundation of the Faith of God and the distinguishing feature of His Law is the consciousness of the Oneness of Mankind."
-- Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 36

I have tried to capture the character of Louis Gregory as given in the book, To Move the World: Louis Gregory and the Advancement of Racial Unity in America; by Gayle Morrison [Bahá'í Publishing Trust (the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States), 1992 ISBN 0-87743-171-X.] (Called hereafter “To Move the World.”) Many of Mr. Gregory's character traits and facts of his life are presented there. I occasionally alter the historical sequence of activities slightly to draw out important elements or to fit them into the time scale of the play but all facts and events mentioned are true (and, generally, referenced). I suspect that the representation of Mr. Gregory is probably too formal and perhaps a bit too “intellectual” to represent an informal chat between two old friends – I base it on the accounts of Mr. Gregory's talks and his published letters and articles which are in a more formal style – but I did not want to stray too far from the research material that was available to me and I haven't been able to get copies of informal correspondence or connect with anyone who knew Mr. Gregory.

Any interactions mentioned between John Good and Louis Gregory are fictional creations of mine as are the events of John Good's life except the fact that he lived on the streets of New York, spent time in prison, and that he met `Abdu'l-Bahá (known as “the Master” in the Bahá'í Faith). Many of the statements attributed to Louis Gregory are derived from “To Move the World” or referenced in other works.

Since John Good was a real person it is possible he lived as I have portrayed him. It is also possible that he met Louis Gregory in the manner I mentioned since John Good lived in New York, had met `Abdu'l-Bahá on April 19, 1912 and was interacting with Bahá'ís there (sp. Juliet Thompson) and since in the book, “To Move the World”, it mentions that the New York Bahá'ís were invited to a reception to celebrate Louis and Louisa Gregory's marriage on Sept. 27, 1912. We don't have a history of the life of John Good beyond the references to his meeting `Abdu'l-Bahá at the Bowery Mission in New York City. I have assumed the profile for John Good given in the Appendix.

The term “coloured” is used often in the play instead of “Black” or “Afro-American” or “people of African heritage”. This term was commonly used during the time the play is set (1921-22) in such organizations as the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) and I felt it would be more accurate for the characters to use.

While I, as author, do not claim any special expertise or experience in the field of race unity, I claim my “authority” by drawing on the real experience of Louis Gregory's life. I believe all who examine his life will realize the significance of his efforts and his commitment to race unity.

The play has been set up as a fairly simple interaction between two characters. There are verbal descriptions of several incidents. If the resources are available some or all of those incidents could be portrayed by actors or with images as “side” scenes to make them more graphic and to

add interest (eg. the incident in Helena) as long as no character plays `Abdu'l-Baha.

The Setting

The Play opens by John Good speaking to an audience of ordinary people that have come to hear him speak sometime after the summer of 1922. The main part of the play is set at Green Acre Bahá'í School in Eliot, Maine during the summer of 1922. Green Acre is a lovely, green setting along the coast of Maine. Mr. Gregory would be 48 years of age and have been a Bahá'í for 13 years. John Good is 70 and a Bahá'í for 10 years.

Imagine that John Good regularly travels the country giving such talks. Mr. Gregory does this as well.

The scene then shifts to the lobby area, just in from the veranda, at the main house at Green Acre. It is a pleasant summer evening in 1922 after dark with no one else around. There is a desk, two chairs, tea and cups and perhaps other “veranda” and desk furniture and items. A nice Persian style table cloth for the desk would be desirable and there should be paper, pens and books for Mr. Gregory who, initially, is working at the desk, perhaps preparing a lesson plan for a Green Acre class (where he regularly taught in the summer). There should be a piece of paper like a “program” for Louis Gregory to read from.

Have a black umbrella hanging on a chair or some place visible. Always having an umbrella present is mentioned as a characteristic of Mr Gregory. You will need something (like a divider) to represent a veranda screen door and/or wall for John Good to “hide” behind although “darkness” may suffice. Discussions between Mr. Gregory and John Good will take place around the desk area. The characters will want to move around a bit and react to each other -- like any two people having a conversation -- so some other “props” might be advisable.

Louis Gregory and John Good are old friends very comfortable with, and with mutual admiration for, each other's (very contrasting) personalities and styles. The actors will need to develop actions and reactions for their characters to enhance the interaction of the two.

John would be as close in appearance to that described in the Appendix as the actor can get (in his late 60's but very fit). He is white, very “earthy” and simple in manner. He would be dressed up as best he could afford (which would be much below the standard of the audience) and he would look uncomfortable in being so dressed up.

Mr. Gregory is, obviously, a black man and is described as tall, only six feet but appearing taller

because of his erect carriage. When he spoke he looked people in the eye; his beautiful deep voice held people's attention. He had immaculate grooming and showed great courtesy. He would probably be dressed in shirt, tie and vest even though he was "off duty". He had a stately bearing. In personal conversation his eyes sparkled and his smile was always ready -- "a most heavenly smile". He was loose jointed and agile and had sensitive, long-fingered hands. He had a black umbrella that he always kept on his arm. He had a clean starched shirt that he always seemed to have ready to wear each morning. He had a dignity that transcended his surroundings. There are pictures and other descriptions in "To Move the World" (p.319-320) The play runs about 45 minutes.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Leslie Hennen, Fred Turley, Reginald Newkirk, and Robert Leek for providing advice and ideas for the play.

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Possible Introduction to the Play

[This could be used by an individual giving an introduction to the Play and for setting the scene.]

Good evening. My name is XXX and I would like to welcome you to this performance and to set the scene for you.

The Play features two very different characters. The first you will meet is a person by the name of John Good. John was a real person who lived in the late 1800's and, we assume, on in to the 1920's. We don't have much historical information about him after 1912 so the events mentioned in the Play after that time are assumptions about his life. John was an earthy man who, when he was not in jail, lived on the streets of the Bowery in New York City. In 1912 he met a person by the name of `Abdu'l-Bahá. This meeting, the Play supposes, transformed John Good in these late years of his life into someone who now travels the country giving talks to audiences like you on various topics such as the importance of the poor and, tonight, about his friend and a key figure in the race unity movement in the first half of this century by the name of Louis Gregory.

You will hear frequent references to `Abdu'l-Bahá sometimes referred to in this Play as the Master or the Servant. Bahá'is believe that `Abdu'l-Bahá was the perfect example of how Bahá'is and others should live their lives - the very embodiment of the Bahá'í teachings. `Abdu'l-Bahá visited North America in 1912.

You'll learn much more about Louis Gregory in this play. He was born in 1874 and died in 1951 at the age of 77. He was the son of slaves. The facts about Louis Gregory's life in this play are true as are the events, incidents, and figures that are mentioned. In the Play, the term "coloured" is used often instead of "Black" or "people of African heritage". This term was commonly used during the time the play is set (1921-22) in such organizations as the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured People (NAACP) and we felt it would be more accurate for the characters to use.

Mr. Gregory spent over forty years of his life working constantly to promote the idea of the Oneness of Humankind and unity between the races. Louis Gregory lived his life in the forefront of the battle for racial unity and justice which is still being waged today.

`Abdu'l-Bahá, in a prayer He wrote for Mr. Gregory in 1909, expressed this wish for Mr. Gregory:

"I hope that thou mayest become the herald of the Kingdom; become the means whereby the white and coloured people shall close their eyes to racial differences and behold the

reality of humanity... ”²

Louis Gregory, by anyone’s reckoning, fulfilled this wish for thousands of people.

John Good is played by YYYY and Louis Gregory is played by ZZZ. The play is produced and directed by WWW. The year is 1922. I hope you enjoy the Play.

²Abdu'l-Bahá. Translated by Mirza Ahmad Sohrab, Washington, D.C., November 17, 1909. Quoted in “A Heavenly Vista”, pilgrim Notes

START

Perhaps start the play, and as a transition for the audience to quiet down, with a recording of the Negro spiritual “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot”³ (Mr. Gregory’s favourite) or some other suitable spiritual.

(John Good enters somewhat ponderously, as is his style, to the front of stage. Spot is on him. Main set with Louis Gregory is dark or else he “freezes” motionless so as not to draw attention.)

JOHN GOOD:

(Walks on stage)

Evenin’ Folks.

My name is John Good and I want to thank ya for coming out to hear what I got to tell you this evenin’.

And I am real happy to tell ya tonight about my beloved coloured brother, my good friend, Mr. Louis Gregory.

(Humorously) He’s a giant ya know. Ya it’s true! Sure he’s only about six foot tall, which might look a bit large to us who gets to pick the apples on the lower branches, if ya know what I mean; but, as sure as any giant, he stomps the earth *(perhaps stomp feet)* shakin’ and upsettin’ the fine white China dishes sitting so high and elegant on their polished shelves *(use hand gestures to illustrate)*. More than a few of them “dishes” have fallen to the ground and been shattered to pieces. In case I’m being too foggy for ya -- I’m talkin about the way Louis shakes up the notions of them mostly white, yeah and sometimes coloured, folks who cling so tightly to those evils called racism and prejudice.

I met Louis in 1912, the same year I met the Servant, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá -- what a great year that was! It was at Louis’ wedding reception. He and his wife, Louisa, had come to New York to marry because that was one of the few places in the whole United States that would marry a coloured man and a white women. All of us Bahá’ís were invited to attend.

Louis married a wonderful woman from England named Miss Louisa Mathew -- a “giant” herself!

³Paul Robeson does a beautiful version of this.

Back in the bad old days, I calls ‘em, (*points behind him with thumb*) when I was living on the street, who was married to who or even whether two folks were married at all didn’t much matter. But my friends Louis and Louisa travel in good circles among fine society and more “normal” folks like yourselves (*pointing aggressively at the audience*) where it **does** matter who you are married to and it **does** matter to a lot of people whether a person from the coloured race and a person from the white race marry each other.

The fact of the matter is back in 1912 they woulda been thrown in jail or not had their marriage recognized in 25 of the 48 states of America.⁴ Fact of the matter is, too that, even today in 1922, that you still take a big risk of “midnight visitors”, I call ‘em when I am being kind, comin to your door to dole out what they somehow convince themselves is “justice”.

I can’t begin to tell you how much **good** come from their marriage. We didn’t know it in them days but these two folks gettin together was “a great service to the world of humanity.”⁵

We didn’t know it then neither how important it was, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá told us, “to gather together these two races, black and white, ...and put such love in their hearts that they shall not only unite but even intermarry.”⁶

‘Abdu’l-Bahá knew. (*Pause*). He introduced ‘em to each other, noticed their fondness for each other, and coaxed ‘em to marry at a time when most folks wouldn’t of thought it was somethin’ possible.

Looking back it’s easy to see why this marriage was so important. In 1919, there were race riots and murderin -- the worst ever in the United States. 25 cities across the country saw whites and coloureds fightin and killin each other and squads of the “midnight visitors” hauling out coloured men and women, torturing ‘em and then lynchin ‘em from a tree or burnin’ them alive. (*Shakes head or other actions of disgust and sadness*).

Ya, lookin back I got a right to be proud callin’ Louisa and Louis Gregory my friends. Even if they did nothin else in their life but get married, they fought a great fight against racial prejudice and discrimination -- that “outrageous... violation of the dignity of human beings.”⁷

⁴To Move the World, p.64

⁵Abdu’l-Bahá quoted in *To Move the World*, p. 46

⁶Abdu’l-Bahá, *Bahá’í World Faith*, Section on “Race Unity”, p.358

⁷The Universal House of Justice, The Promise of World Peace, October 1985; p. 25

Ya know I said Mr. Gregory was a giant. But he's also made of gold too. (*smiling broadly*). Now I wouldn't lie to ya!

'Abdu'l-Bahá said that Louis Gregory has a pure heart and is like pure gold -- he's acceptable currency anywhere he goes.⁸ Yep, people almost always make him as welcome as a gold piece (*maybe toss a coin on the table*) even when he says things that make makes them squirm a bit because of the way they use ta think.

Well, while I'm waxin poetic here, let me tell you another thing that folks say about Louis Gregory. It's that he gives off this "light". Folks that know him say it's the light shining from his soul.

And it ain't something he just catches once in a while. No, sir ee folks! He seems to have this light all the time (*mysteriously*) as though he "lived, moved, and breathed in the realm of the Spirit."⁹ Even walkin with Louis on a dark night, when you wouldn't expect to be able to see the features of a dark coloured man that well,... that light glows from his face. I call it, the light shinin' from the force of unity.¹⁰

And I'll tell ya why Louis got this glow. Not only does he spend almost all his time going about the country doing God's work -- tellin folks about God's message for this day -- but he also tells folks about how God wants all people to get together in peace and love and to stop all this hogwash about one race being better than the other. He tells 'em how there's only one important race on this planet -- the human race.

In fact, Louis will tell you himself that every one of you (*points at audience*) can get this glow when, with a prayer in your mind, you do work for the forces of love and unity. You can all become a torch glowin' with the bright light of God. When ya do that out of love, you'll draw people like (*slight pause while thinks of examples*) moths to the light or, like a lighthouse, you'll direct 'em to the proper path, the safe passage -- they'll be attracted by the unity and love **you're** creatin'.¹¹

⁸Abdu'l-Bahá quoted in To Move the World, p.314

⁹To Move the World, p. 314

¹⁰To Move the World, p.314

¹¹Based on To Move the World, p.315

Like `Abdu'l-Bahá said “Every human creature is the servant of God...no one should glorify himself over another....”¹²

Louis and me had a good chat about this last summer up at Green Acre summer school.

(Fade to black. Lights up on Louis Gregory working alone at his desk in the sitting\library area at Green Acre.)(Some pause to allow focus on Louis Gregory and John Good to move into the darkness).

JOHN GOOD:

(Quietly. From behind door or from darkness, hidden from Mr. Gregory)

Pockets!

(Mr. Gregory lifts head, sees nothing, then settles back to work.)

JOHN GOOD:

(A little louder) Pockets!

(Mr. Gregory lifts head, looks around)

JOHN GOOD:

(Fairly loud) Pockets!

LOUIS GREGORY:

(Smiles broadly, knowingly). (Stands, digs in pockets and brings out 3 nickels and a dime and slams them on the desk shouting):

25 cents! *(leaves pocket turned inside out).*

JOHN GOOD:

(Enters quickly. Has both pockets turned inside out. Slams 2 quarters on the desk shouting):

Blast you! 50 cents!

How in God's great goodness does an educated man like yourself **ALWAYS** manage to have **less** money in his pocket than a poor uneducated, street rat like me.

LOUIS GREGORY:

¹² `Abdu'l-Bahá, Promulgation of Universal Peace, p. 63

Well its like I always tell you, John , poverty is one of the best qualifications you can have to be an effective teacher ¹³ -- people just trust that you're more sincere when you don't have any money and aren't doing something for the money-- and, the fact of the matter is, I just never have or need much money.

JOHN GOOD: *(renewing an old joke between them)*

Well you might not have much gold in your pockets but `Abdu'l-Bahá did say your whole body was like pure gold and you'd be acceptable in any market, so, I guess you can always chop off a finger and take that down to the bank if you get too hard up.

LOUIS GREGORY: *(laughs and gives John a warm hug)*

John Good! My dear, dear friend. What joy it brings me to see you, again. *(Pause briefly, looking at John)* Oh this is just too wonderful that you have made your way here to Green Acre. *(Pauses briefly, then hugs him warmly a second time)*. Please sit down, have some tea and tell me all about your travels.

(Both look at each other's pockets turned inside out. Both laugh, point, and then fix pockets.)

(Mr. Gregory serves John tea.) (Both pause, get settled and sip some tea.)

JOHN GOOD:

And, my friend, how is Louisa? Is she still off spreadin God's Word in Eastern Europe? What a travellin' family you have.

LOUIS GREGORY:

I got a letter from Louisa this week and things are fine with her. She has many stories to tell. I expect her back in September and we hope to spend at least a month together here in Eliot, Maine before we both have to be off again.

John, you look so well. And I have heard of the talks you have been giving and how well received they have been. What a great service that is and how instructive they must be to those hearing them. We must try to be in the same town sometime in the future so that I can hear you speak.

JOHN GOOD:

Well you know how much I enjoy gettin together with you but having you hear me speak would be like havin a professor sit in on a kindergarten class -- seems like a waste of words for me to be tellin' you how I sees the world.

¹³Paraphrases Louis Gregory quoted in To Move the World, p.307

LOUIS GREGORY: *(in a mildly chiding tone)*

John, please don't ever underestimate your talent for touching people's hearts, and don't ever underestimate the value of the message you are bringing that we should appreciate the poor in our midst and how much closer to God the poor are than those people attached to the things of this world. People need to be reminded of this and how Jesus Christ Himself warned us that it was easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.¹⁴

But since we are on the topic of money, how do you support yourself and pay for your travels around the country? That fifty cents you have in your pocket -- while it is a fortune compared to what I have *(gives a joking slap on John's knee)* -- won't take you very far.

JOHN GOOD:

Well for travellin' I got a good thumb or can hop a freight train to a lot of spots. And, I always been as strong as an ox - and just about as bright - so even at 70 I can still do odd jobs. Mostly stuff that others won't do.

Ya know **one** job I can almost always get is cleaning up at hospitals -- mostly cleaning up the blood, the parts of bodies, and who knows what else that gets left when the doctors and nurses gets done doin their jobs.

(Pointing to emphasize) Now there's a job where you can tell a God-loving person from one who just mouths the words. You gotta believe with all of your heart that God's qualities are hidden in every human to be a janitor at a hospital. You can be a doctor, a nurse, or a lawyer without believing in God, but you sure as heck can't be a janitor at a hospital and clean up all of them parts of humans without believing they're parts belonging to God and treatin 'em with that kind of respect.¹⁵

LOUIS GREGORY:

(Somewhat in amazement) Dear Lord, my friend, how special you are!

(Thoughtful pause)(With concern) But , John are you well? You are almost 70! How can you keep travelling all over the country like this at your age?

JOHN GOOD:

¹⁴Paraphrase of Jesus Christ, Luke 18:25

¹⁵Based on an idea from a scene on the television show ER, September 25, 1997

(Stands. Starts to sing the spiritual song)

Lord..... I keeps so busy workin for the Kingdom,
Keeps so busy workin for the Kingdom,
Keeps so busy workin for the Kingdom,
Ain't got time ta die.

(Mr. Gregory joins in).

Cause..... It takes all-a my time to serve my Master
All-a my time to serve my Lord
Cause if I don't serve Him, the rocks are gonta cry out
Glory and honour
Glory and honour
I ain't got time ta die.

(repeat ending, maybe add some harmony, humorously exaggerating)

I ain't got time..... ta die!¹⁶

(Both laugh heartily and hug)

LOUIS GREGORY:

(In "southern" dialect) Well John, now we got you singing Negro spirituals better than many of us "culled folks are wont to do.... I thought I knew you white folks but now I see I am not on to all your ways."¹⁷ *(Smiles broadly)*

[Both sit, Louis serves some more tea. Pauses. Mood changes to serious.]

LOUIS GREGORY:

John, I am very worried about the times we are in. You must speak more in your talks about the importance of racial unity and full rights for the coloured. You know I have dedicated my life to doing this with passion and persistence but we can't have "a coloured man always clamouring for coloured people's rights."¹⁸

It just smacks too much of promoting our own self-interests and not what it really is -- promoting the interests and Will of God Almighty! Without it, my friend, blood will keep running in the

¹⁶"Ain't Got Time To Die", Hall Johnson; E.C. Schirmer Music Company, Boston

¹⁷Louis Gregory quoted in To Move the World, p.87

¹⁸To Move the World, p.211

streets of this country -- the blood of whites AND coloureds!

JOHN GOOD: (*Concerned*)

You're worried more than I ever seen you, Louis, what's wrong?

LOUIS GREGORY:

(*Pauses thoughtfully. John Good reacts getting increasingly agitated.*)

John, these last few years have been some of the worst ever in America for the rise of not just racial prejudice, but racial hatred.

In 1919 there was incident after incident all over the United States. Coloured men and women were hauled out of their homes by mobs, beaten, been tied to trees, given "surgery below the waist", if you know what I mean, then strung up or burned alive.

Even coloured soldiers returning from the Great War, who went to Europe and risked their lives for this country, were hauled out and killed -- still in their uniforms!

Totally innocent and defenceless people have been shot, their homes burned, and stores looted. Even elderly coloureds have been lynched, and children as young as one and two were found shot through the head!

JOHN GOOD: (*Shocked*)

Not children!

LOUIS GREGORY: (*Pauses thoughtfully*)

These latest riots are nastier and larger than anything in the past, John. No longer are the Coloured prepared to be intimidated and put in their place. They have been through a war. They know how to fight and they now know they have all of the God-given abilities and self worth of any member of the human race.

It was so bad in 1919 that they call it the "Red Summer" because of all of the blood that flowed.

Of course the Master, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, warned Americans about this back in 1912. He said "Until these prejudices are entirely removed from the people of the world the realm of humanity will not find rest. Nay, rather, discord and bloodshed will be increased day by day, and the foundation of the prosperity of the world of man will be destroyed." ¹⁹

JOHN GOOD:

¹⁹ 'Abdu'l-Bahá, quoted in To Move the World, p.129

(*Angrily*) I know it ain't Bahá'í-like to say this but these “midnight visitors” -- the “good” white folks who travel in packs at night and who wear their white hoods of “honour” -- got to be the lowest kind of creatures in God's creation.

I sure ain't been an angel most of my life but on my worst days I never sunk as low as this pack of wolves -- my apologies to the wolves. I would just love to get a few of them alone and to let my fists have a little talk to them (*clenching fists in fighting mode*).

LOUIS GREGORY:

I know, John, it is very hard not to get angry and want to answer such behaviour with violence. My own grand-daddy was shot to death one night by one of those mobs. (*Pausing thoughtfully*)

The mob, to everyone's amazement, spared my grandma. I'll always be grateful to Grandma Elsie²⁰ for showing me how prayer and religion can keep hate and anger from chewing you up.

JOHN GOOD:

Louis, in all the time I've known ya, you've never mentioned your grand-daddy. I could never keep from seekin vengeance against folks that done in my family like that.

LOUIS GREGORY:

John, in the 10 years I have been working to change the situation in America, I know that violence is not the way to get rid of prejudice once and for all. The core of this issue of racial prejudice is not about laws and social and economic rights. The core is about the hearts and beliefs of humans. It's about curing a disease -- racism -- that has infected this continent and many others.

As always, we Bahá'ís have to look to the Master for our example. The Master spoke many times when He visited the United States and Canada before large coloured, and mixed-race, audiences. He spoke at universities, churches of many different denominations, at the national convention of the NAACP²¹ (“*N, double A, C, P*”), at state dinners in Washington, D.C., and at countless other events. Never once in those talks did He dwell on the misfortunes or the injustices suffered by those in the audience, even though He himself was unjustly imprisoned for **40 years** and even though He suffered greatly at the hands of oppressors.

Instead, what `Abdu'l-Bahá sought to do was to instill a confidence in the oppressed and downtrodden that change was inevitable -- that it is God's Will -- and He instilled a sense of their

²⁰This is a made up name but the facts mentioned are true. JC

²¹Fourth Annual Convention, in Chicago in 1912.

own beauty and self-worth.

He also never re-enforced our natural inclination to blame and degrade our oppressors. When `Abdu'l-Bahá spoke at Howard University in Washington before an audience of mostly coloured students, professors and administrators, He **praised** the good qualities of white Americans while at the same time stressing how urgent it was for them to show love and justice toward all races.²²

JOHN GOOD: (*forcefully*)

But if you don't tell white folks about their prejudices or demand that the laws be changed to help the average Joe then those well-off folks and the people they use, the hatemongers, will just keep puttin us down and exploitin' us. I would lay dollars to doughnuts that many of them riots were hatched in the living rooms of some pretty well off white folks lookin' to take over the lands and businesses of the Negroes.²³

LOUIS GREGORY: (*calmly*)

My dear friend, your obvious feeling for this issue inspires me. With you on our side how can we lose? But you must never underestimate the Power of God to change the hearts of humanity. These days religion is often dismissed as a force of change but history shows us time and again how it has overcome the powerful forces that were arrayed against it -- forces of blind imitation, of self-interest, and of ignorance. Think about how the various religions of God have brought together even the bitterest enemies under a common banner and caused massive changes in whole civilizations.

JOHN GOOD:

(*Politely acknowledging*) Oh I see. (*Pause as he thinks.*) (*John Good's whole face lighting up as he really understands*) I see!²⁴

(*Excitedly*) It's like building a fine house. You can have the fanciest walls and roof and floors but if it ain't got a solid foundation built on stone then the building ain't gonna stand up for very long. And there ain't no foundation for race unity and social justice solid enough except religion and the Love of God.²⁵

²²Paraphrased from To Move the World, pp 57-58. See *The Promulgation of Universal Peace* for the text of `Abdu'l-Bahá's speech at Howard University.

²³Opinion of Louis Gregory and Dr. Zia Bagdadi mentioned in To Move the World, p.130

²⁴This dialogue based on a story in *The Diary of Juliet Thompson*, p. 331

²⁵Based on a response of `Abdu'l-Bahá about how to bring about social justice recounted in *The Diary of Juliet Thompson*, pp. 165-66

You and me are proof of this. I reckon' we'd a never run in to each other if we hadn't both enlisted in God's army and, without this religion, we wouldn'ta ever been such good friends.

LOUIS GREGORY:

Exactly, my friend! Now don't get me wrong, "the wish of the underprivileged to be treated as fairly as other Americans in every avenue of human advancement is both proper and reasonable. *(As if making a speech)* Untenable is the attitude of those who would withhold it because of complexion or other superficial reasons. [And don't forget that] the friends of the oppressed [are] show[ing] rapid increase in numbers and powers..., no human might can long debar them from the long-sought goal. Earth and air, fire and water, the stars in their courses, the high tide of destiny, and the Will of divine Providence are all arrayed against the forces of oppression."²⁶

JOHN GOOD:

(Somewhat amazed) My brother, you could defeat an army with the power of your tongue. I've had police nightsticks jolt me less than the words that come out of your mouth. I wish my words could have that much weight to 'em.

LOUIS GREGORY: *(Fresh topic)*

John, do you know how special the age is in which we live? God has made a new Law that is the watchword of life in this age. It is the "Law" of the Oneness of Humankind.

This new Law, "will remove the superstitions that pall, the hatreds that blight, the prejudices that becloud, and the preparation for slaughter that now threatens the existence of all humanity."²⁷ The Law has been written, declared, and is slowly going in to effect throughout the world. And like all just laws, the vast majority of people will gladly obey it as being in the best interests of all the community.

JOHN GOOD:

But certain people are breakin laws all the time. I've broken a few in my time, especially when they got in the way of me doin what I wanted.

²⁶Louis Gregory, quoted in To Move the World, p. 312

²⁷Louis Gregory, "The Races of Men - Many or One?" in *The Bahá'í World*, Vol. 3 (1928-30), p.335

LOUIS GREGORY:

Ah, but the Laws of God aren't like the laws created by men. They are more like the laws of nature. No human can oppose them. A man can say he doesn't believe in the law of gravity and can even walk around for a good part of his life pretending gravity doesn't have anything to do with him (*Perhaps strut around humorously*) but let that man come to the edge of a cliff and then you will see how far he is able to fly and how quickly he starts to believe in the law of gravity. (*Laughing*)

It's the same with this seemingly simple principle that Bahá'u'lláh, gave the world -- that all humanity should be like one family. Everyone is affected by it. Everyone, sooner or later will have to believe in it and even live by it. They have no choice. It would be like not believing in the sun at noonday.

JOHN GOOD:

But it seems to me ya might as well try to talk a hole in an iron pot as ta get some of these people to change their ways or to even listen to those kinds of ideas.

LOUIS GREGORY:

I know it seems that way, my friend, but this Divine law - the principle of the Oneness of Humankind -- given by the Voice of God -- is "clearer than the deductions of science, weightier than the might of princes, wiser than the councils of statesmen, kinder than the hearts of philanthropists, and sweeter than the songs of seraphs...[It is] calling all mankind to the unity of the human family, the oneness of the world of humanity."²⁸

JOHN GOOD:

Louis, you know that I would follow the sweet scent of your words to the ends of the earth, but I just can't get the picture in my mind that great bands of people can raise themselves up from their "prisons of self" and ascend unto such glory.

LOUIS GREGORY:

Oh, I can see it... quite clearly, John. When you give up your own "will, make over [your] own desires and [your] life to the Will of God", the whole "design takes perfect shape."²⁹ But what you and I have to do is tell more people about this Law and we have to enlist others to our aid.

JOHN GOOD:

²⁸Louis Gregory, "The Races of Men – Many or One?" in *The Bahá'í World*, Vol. 3 (1928-30), p. 335

²⁹Marzieh Gail quoted in *The Diary of Juliet Thompson*, Kalimat Press, p. xv

That's what I sees as the hard part, Louis, ya might as well try to talk a hole in an iron pot.

LOUIS GREGORY:

(Pause and serve more tea). It may be easier than you think, John. I have seen this principle of the Oneness of Humankind in action. My friend, I have seen it work miracles.

I will never forget how I arrived in Helena, Arkansas in October of 1919 a few days after there had been race riots in that area.

The story I heard was that "scores of helpless Negroes were killed"³⁰, [and then] scores more...were herded into prison in Helena... where the mob tried to lynch them and where they were shocked by electricity, beaten, and tortured to make them confess they had a conspiracy to kill white folks. After ... a "trial" (*exaggerate the quotes with fingers*), twelve of them were sentenced to be electrocuted!"³¹

When I arrived good folks, white and coloured, were in a state of despair and complete pessimism after seeing the hate and destruction that took place during that riot.

I gave six talks in Helena. In those talks I always stressed the oneness of humankind and how the new world, "God's Kingdom on earth", was going to emerge. Just hearing this Message created a hope and unity among the good people and dispelled the barrier of mistrust -- even among the whites in authority -- that was both paralysing them and making matters worse.³²

JOHN GOOD:

I wish more people could hear your message. What a different place this world would be!

LOUIS GREGORY:

Let me give you another example of how putting the law of the Oneness of Mankind into action can change hearts. This time it's how the Master dealt with the issue of prejudice -- which is the very antithesis of the oneness of the human race.

³⁰ In the town of Elaine very near to Helena.

³¹*Crossing The Danger Water: Three Hundred Years of African-American Writing*, edited by Deirdre Mullane, (Publisher: Doubleday, 1993) , p. 461

³²To Move the World, p. 131

(Use hand gestures to humourously take audience through) At a luncheon and reception given in His honour at the Persian embassy in Washington in 1912, I remember how `Abdu'l-Bahá just quietly changed the place settings that had been arranged according to Washington's diplomatic conventions so that I sat at His right hand -- and I had not even been invited to the luncheon! He then proceeded to give a talk about race unity without once mentioning the prejudice inherent in the social conventions that that high society audience practised every day. They couldn't help but get the message in principle and, with me sitting at `Abdu'l-Bahá's right hand, see it in practice.

JOHN GOOD: *(greatly amused)*

Now **that** I would like to of seen. I imagine more than a few Washington heads were turned that day and more than a few tongues were waggin on into the night.

LOUIS GREGORY:

I am sure the Master's goal in His talks was always to change humanity's **hearts** not just change the laws of the land or to change **one** small prejudice among hearts filled with many prejudices learned over the years.

JOHN GOOD:

But how are we goin to change them hearts? It's hard for the best of folks to get along without a bit of good luck.

LOUIS GREGORY:

Through the power of God, my friend! Through the power of God. God has always claimed dominion over the **hearts** of mankind and left the petty material things of this world to those who value them.³³

The Master showed us how to reach the hearts of people or, more to the point, how to help them discover what God has already placed in their hearts. People are capable of a level of goodness that they never even dream is in them.

I am sure the Master's approach has far more long term impact than trying to shame or anger those who, by design or by ignorance, oppress their fellow men and women. Certainly the impressions He left and the feelings He evoked opened doors for me to give my talks all over the United States and up into Canada.

³³Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings*, No. CV. "By the righteousness of God! It is not Our wish to lay hands on your kingdoms. Our mission is to seize and possess the hearts of men. Upon them the eyes of Bahá are fastened."

JOHN GOOD: (*perhaps leaning back in chair*)

Ya know the Master always threw my thinkin right out the window. What first got me thinkin about wantin to meet the Master was that He had spent more time in prison than me -- 40 years! And the most important thing that made me know I had to meet this Man was when they told us that He come out of prison **loving** the world. I couldn't imagine anyone not hatin the people that locked you away, especially when they done it because of your religion and not because ya broke any laws.

From the first day I heard 'Abdu'l-Bahá's name, He threw out all of my reckoning about how you should do things, like trying to change peoples minds by beatin 'em over the head. (*hold up fist*).

LOUIS GREGORY

John, I hope you have heard that the Master has taken another very important and very exciting action. When He heard about the terrible riots of 1919, he asked the American Bahá'í Community to organize a series of "large, well-publicized interracial meetings, conducted not to protest any specific grievance or to seek improvement of the lot of American blacks in some particular way, but to proclaim the oneness of mankind and to promote 'racial amity' between black and white Americans."³⁴

The meetings are designed "to bring the races together, attract the attention of the country, enlist the aid of the famous and influential people and [to] have a far-reaching effect upon the destiny of the nation itself."³⁵ They are also meant to provide a way for thousands of whites and coloureds to express their support for racial unity, to overcome their shame for the events of the 'Red Summer' and to help address the failures of the existing approaches to dealing with racial prejudice.

(*Lifts up a sheet of paper from the desk*) I've got the program from of the Washington conference right here. Here is what it said about the conference:

(*Reading*)

"A half century ago in America slavery was abolished.

"Now there has arisen need for another great effort in order that prejudice may be overcome.

"Correction of the present wrong requires no army, for the field of action is the hearts of our citizens. The instrument to be used is kindness, the ammunition – understanding.

³⁴*To Move the World*, p. 132

³⁵Quoted in *To Move the World*, p. 132

The actors in this engagement for right are all of the inhabitants of these United States.”³⁶

³⁶*To Move the World*, p 139

Never has there been this type of gathering of whites and coloureds in the history of America and, as far as I know, the Washington Racial Amity Conference was the first of its kind in the world!³⁷

Thousands attended this first conference in May of 1921 and thousands more were reached by the publicity and circulation of the program for the conference – all of this in a city that had been torn apart by one of the worst race riots of the “Red Summer”.

(Sadly, remembering death of `Abdu'l-Bahá) John, you know that one of the last messages by the Master to the friends in America before He died on November 28th of 1921 was to approve the holding of the next Racial Amity Conference in Springfield, Massachusetts.

His telegraph message to the organizers of that event read simply: “Approved. God confirms.”³⁸ *(Emotionally, repeating)* “God confirms”, my friend.

I have seen a picture³⁹ of the Springfield Conference held just last December. The auditorium was filled - filled! - with roughly equal numbers of whites and coloureds all sitting together and seeing in person what race unity was all about. What a wonderful tribute to the Master - may God bless His soul - and what a wonderful step in the struggle for race unity. *(Somewhat overcome with emotion).*

JOHN GOOD:

(Encouragingly) And you can bet your last dollar that it's not going to stop in Springfield, Louis. These conferences and the good they beget will break out all over the country in the years ahead. These conferences and all of the talks you've given and the life you have lived, my dear dear friend, are the seeds - the seed of good deeds- cast into the rich soil of the hearts of good folks everywhere. They'll be sproutin up, and bloomin, and producing a hundred fruits for every one that's been planted and each fruit will produce a hundred more seeds for the growin; until this whole country is a flower garden of love and fellowship.⁴⁰

³⁷*To Move the World*, p. 138

³⁸*To Move the World*, pp. 144-145. `Abdu'l-Bahá's cable was sent Nov. 11, 1921.

³⁹*To Move the World*, pp. 136-37

⁴⁰See the account of other conventions by Louis Gregory in “Racial Amity in America” *The Bahá'í World*, Vol. VII (1936-38), pp. 652-666: Other conventions and similar gatherings were held in Washington (three more conferences); Springfield; New York City; Philadelphia; Dayton; Green Acre, Maine; Chicago; Montreal, Canada; Urbana; Geneva, New York; Rochester; Portsmouth; Boston; Detroit; Atlantic City; Pittsburgh; Denver; Portland and Seattle; Los Angeles; and Cincinnati over the period 1921 to 1932).

LOUIS GREGORY:

You're right my friend. Other people of good will and clear Faith will not only accept God's Law but, through their work and the support of the multitudes who feel the righteousness of this mission, make strides which will astonish us.

(Imagining his vision. Voice rising to climax) John I have a vision of the future which I see so clearly -- a future not far off. My vision is of a time when **all** are recognized for their nobility; a time when **all** hearts are seen as the home of God's beauty and glory⁴¹ – a home holier than all of the Shrines and churches of the earth.

Coloured men and women, yellow, red, and white all have this holy shrine within them (*gesture toward heart*) just waiting for people to come and worship. My vision is that soon everyone will see this and pay homage at this house of worship with its gleaming marble pillars so long hidden by the fog of ignorance and racial prejudice.

And in that shrine each race will sing its own hymn rich with the rhythms of its culture and heritage. And in my dream the hymns don't clash but blend together in a wonderful song of praise to the Creator of all humanity -- a song sweeter than any that's been heard on this earth before.

(Emotionally.)

John, I try my best to live this vision. It's always there..., in front, beckoning me... beckoning to the whole world. *(Beckon to the audience)*

(John places his hand warmly on the shoulder of Mr. Gregory, both seeing the vision in front. Mr. Gregory places his hand on top warmly reassuring each other.)

(Pause. Music raises. Actors freeze. Fade lights)

SONG: “Glory Be”⁴²

⁴¹Based on Bahá'u'lláh, *Hidden Words*, Arabic 59. The significance of the heart as one of the holiest of shrines was pointed out to me by Auxiliary Board Member, Meim Smith in a workshop.

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.

⁴²Music by Kathy Tahiri based on the prayer by Bahá'u'lláh (pp. 78-79, [A Selection of Bahá'í Prayers and Holy Writings](#); Bahá'í Publishing Trust of Malaysia)

“Glory be to Thee, O God, for Thy Manifestation of love to mankind! O Thou Who art our Life and Life, guide

Thy servants in Thy way, and make us rich in Thee and free from all save Thee.

“In the hearts of Thy beloved the fire of Thy love, that it may consume the thought of everything save Thee.

“Reveal to us, O God, Thine exalted eternity -- that Thou hast ever been and wilt ever be, and that there is no God save Thee. Verily, in Thee will we find comfort and strength. Glory be to Thee, O God.”

END.

APPENDIX - PROFILE OF JOHN GOOD

I picture John Good as having become a Bahá'í in 1912 and feeling compelled to go out and tell others about his experience with `Abdu'l-Bahá by giving public talks. He has done this for the last 10 years traveling the country speaking to small town audiences. (It is even possible, although there is no proof of this, that `Abdu'l-Bahá may have told him to go out and to "tell his story" from the perspective of a poor, street person.) I have had to embellish on and have expanded on the limited descriptions in The Diary of Juliet Thompson (pp. 254-262)

Here is my vision of John Good's life and character.

He was born in a small town in upstate New York to a low income family. His parents would have been under the "normal" pressure of the time to have him Christened as a baby in the local church. His parents, especially his father, may have been alcoholic and abusive and John rebelled against this. He would have had a relatively loveless family life. Facing a clash with the "rule" of the father of the house and as a big, strong 10 year old, he may have been shipped off or indentured to a farmer in the area and lived there for a number of years working for room and board.

He learned to deal with aggression by using his fists and with his strength and size he didn't lose too many "arguments". This eventually got him into more and more trouble. He also would have become discontented with working for nothing on a farm in rural New York. The two circumstances may have pushed him to head for New York City at some time in his late teens or early twenties.

With no one there and a lot of internal anger, he drifted into life on the streets. He eventually would have found some "place" among thieves, drunks and other dispossessed people. He would have subsisted by stealing and preying on others weaker than himself although he always had some inbred code of honor that allowed him to rationalize his life and placed some limits on his actions.

He would have run afoul of the law many times and served various jail sentences; dealing with the aggression in the jail by fighting it to the point "that they had hung him by his thumbs". Although he would never admit it or even show it much, after more than 50 years, John Good was getting tired of his life and having to fight everyone and everything and never letting himself be loved or give love.

He never got married despite "knowing" several women. He was never trapped by alcohol. He always felt an emptiness that he couldn't fill. He was smart enough to see the exploitation by and privilege of the wealthy and powerful. His dreams were of having anything he wanted "for the takin".

He was transformed by meeting `Abdu'l-Bahá in 1912. He suddenly felt love for the first

time in his life. He suddenly felt “a sense of shame” for his past deeds that, deep down, he knew were wrong -- a major transformation for John Good.

In what I feel is a typical character trait for John Good, things were now very clear to him. He rarely saw any “greys” or reasons to procrastinate once he has decided something is “right”. He had made a commitment to `Abdu'l-Bahá and to God and he was going to keep his word with all of the strength of body and will that he had shown all of his life. He willingly accepted the “deal” of offering the rest of his life to doing good in exchange for all of the wrongs he had done up to the point he had met the Master.

At this stage of his transformation (10 years afterward) he has “matured” considerably and rarely slips back into a confrontational style or brings to the fore his long-held dislike of the rich and privileged. He will continue to evolve in his transformation as time goes on and as he receives the Divine confirmations from doing what `Abdu'l-Bahá has told him to do -- to teach.

John Good is described by Juliet Thompson as “an enormous man with a head like a lion and a great shock of white hair. From his boyhood he had spent his life in one prison or another and now, in his old age, had behaved so rebelliously in Sing Sing (prison)” that they had hung him by his thumbs (Diary, p. 255).

Other insights to John Good’s character can be obtained by reading other plays I have written featuring him: “My Name is John Good, Servant of the Servant”(June 1997) and “John Good on Being Good” (under development).