

Alain Leroy Locke, Herald of the Harlem Renaissance

Interment Ceremony

Congressional Cemetery, Washington, D.C.

September 13, 2014

Presentation: Katharine R. Bigelow, Representative of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States

There are the facts of a man's life, those details that provide the context and outline, that help us to place him in our sense of history.

Then, there are, in some instances, his words, the true currency of his thoughts and his legacy.

Alain Locke left us his words, etched in history. They are today as relevant, as illuminating, as perspicacious, perhaps even more than when he first uttered or wrote them. Would he offer us still the same advice and insights? Certainly, those issues he cared about haunt us today, as yet unresolved or healed in the body politic.

Alain Locke became a Bahá'í in Washington, DC in 1918, during the very early days of the religion's presence in America and the same year he earned his doctorate from Harvard. The Bahá'í Faith, God's restated Truth for this day, teaches that one God has brought religious truth throughout the millennia and that He created one human family to realize its unity and to establish world peace, just as the prophets of old had promised. Locke dedicated many years to race amity efforts. Between 1924 and 1932, he served on the Bahá'í National Race Amity Committee. For more than 20 years, he spoke at conferences devoted to this issue, the one Bahá'ís believe is still the most vital and challenging issue facing America.

He visited the Bahá'í World Center in Haifa, Israel, then Palestine, in 1923, and met Shoghi Effendi, then the head of Bahá'í Faith. Shoghi Effendi was also an Oxford man -- from 1920 until called to his religious duties in late 1921. He had attended Balliol College at Oxford. What must the meeting of these two deeply thoughtful men have been like?

Locke himself reflects on that meeting in 1923:

“Refreshingly human after this intense experience, was the relaxation of our walk and talk in the gardens. Here the evidences of love, devotion and service were as concrete and as practical and as human as inside the shrines they had been mystical and abstract and superhuman. Shoghi Effendi is a master of detail as well as of principle, of executive foresight as well as of projective vision. But I have never heard details so redeemed of their natural triviality as when talking to him of the plans for the beautifying and laying out of the terraces and gardens. They were important because they all were meant to dramatize the emotion of the place and quicken the soul even through the senses. It was night in the quick twilight of the East before we had finished the details of inspecting the gardens, and then by the lantern light, the faithful gardener showed us to the austere retreat of the great Expounder of the teaching. It taught me with what purely simple and meager elements a master workman works.” (1)

One of the many duties of Shoghi Effendi was the translation of the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, Prophet Founder of the Bahá'í Faith, from their original Persian and Arabic into English. He asked Locke to review his translation of the *Kitab-i-Iqán*, *The Book of Certitude*, Bahá'u'lláh's preeminent doctrinal work, saying through his secretary that Locke was “the person “best fitted to render him [Shoghi Effendi] an assistance” in giving critical feedback on the translation itself. (2)

After Locke had reviewed the draft and sent back his suggested edits, Shoghi Effendi wrote to him:

“My dear co-worker:

I wish to add a few words expressing my deep appreciation of your valued suggestions in connection with the translation of the *Iqán*. I wish also to express the hope that you may be able to lend increasing assistance to the work of the Cause, as I have always greatly admired your exceptional abilities and capacity to render distinguished services to the Faith...

Your true brother,

Shoghi" (3)

During our own present days, it can be difficult to believe that the world has evolved at all since Alain Locke embraced the universal teachings of Bahá'u'lláh almost a century ago. Would he address us using his same words were he alive today, reflecting upon the global crises of war and ravages of hatred and the still-potent enmities within our own national midst that divide us by race and class and gender? Could his words sooth us? Would we pay him attention in our sound-bite world?

I close with Alain Locke's own words from his essay, "Unity Through Diversity: A Bahá'í Perspective."

““There is one great spiritual advantage in the tidal series of negative upsets and breakdowns in the contemporary world and that is the ever-accumulative realization of the need for a complete reconstruction of life ... What the contemporary mind stands greatly in need of is the divorce of the association of uniformity with the notion of the universal, and the substitution of the notion of equivalence. Sameness in difference may be a difficult concept for us, -- it is. But the difficulty is historical and traditional, and is the specific blight and malady of the modern and Western mind...”

Locke continues his thoughts,

“I take it for granted that the desire and effort to reach universality in the characteristic modern and Western way would be fatal if possible, and is fortunately impossible in practice. Only in the chastisement of defeat will it be recognized how unnecessary and hopeless the association of the two concepts really is. Spiritual unity is never achieved by an exacting demand for conformity or through any program of imposed agreement. In fact, the demands of such an attitude are self-defeating. What we need to learn most is how to discover unity and spiritual equivalence underneath tile differences, which at present so disunite and sunder us, and how to establish some basic spiritual reciprocity on the principle of unity in diversity.” (4)

Alain Locke wrote:

“Just as world-mindedness must dominate and remold nation-mindedness, so we must transform eventually race-mindedness into human-mindedness.” (5)

(1) Bahá'í World, Vol III, 1928-1930, p. 280, 282

(2) Buck, Christopher, “Alain Locke: Bahá'í Philosopher,” http://bahai-library.com/buck_alain_locke_bsr#f126

(3) Ibid.

(4) Bahá'í World, Vol IV 1930-1932, p. 372-373

(5) “Alain Locke: Four Talks Redefining Democracy, Education, and World Citizenship.” Edited and introduced by Christopher Buck and Betty J. Fisher. World Order 38.3 (2006/2007): 21–41.

[Features four previously unpublished speeches by Alain Locke: “The Preservation of the Democratic Ideal” (1938 or 1939); “Stretching Our Social Mind” (1944); “On Becoming World Citizens” (1946); “Creative Democracy” (1946 or 1947). [Published in 2008.]