

“Be Natural, Be Happy”

“Welcome, my boys,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá said to William and his brother Wendell. Then he lovingly chanted a prayer for them. It was November 1901, and the young Dodge brothers had just arrived in ‘Akká (now in Israel) after a long journey from New York, U.S. William was 21 and Wendell was 18.

The brothers stayed in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s home for 19 days, eating meals with him and some Persian Bahá’ís. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá spoke, the young men eagerly took notes. The talks were published in a booklet by the New York Bahá’ís.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá told them, “One of the most severe of the world’s diseases is that of contention and strife . . . The faithful followers of God must be as the banner of peace and as the most luminous sun of harmony and union.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá talked of serious subjects, but he had a good sense of humor. One day, a thick soup was served. William rested his spoon in the soup and raised his hand to adjust his collar. As he brought his hand back down, his elbow hit the spoon’s handle. Soup flew right into the whiskers of the Persian Bahá’í sitting next to him!

William was terribly embarrassed. But ‘Abdu’l-Bahá laughed and said, “Do not worry. That is a blessing.”

Wendell asked, “Who gets the blessing, Bill, you or the friend with the whiskers?”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá laughed again.

William said, “Wendell and I were so glad to be with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. At . . . times we were quite jolly.”

But their interpreter, Dr. Amin Farid, was uneasy about their carefree attitude. He said when they were with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, they should be reverent, bow their heads, and avoid smiling.

So the next time William and Wendell went to the dining room, they entered with bowed heads



After ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was released from ‘Akká in 1908, he welcomed guests from around the world to his home on Haparsim Street in Haifa.

and did not smile. But ‘Abdu’l-Bahá quickly passed them by, paying no attention.

Back in their room, the brothers wondered why ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s attitude toward them had changed. They decided that they weren’t very good actors. At the next meal, they smiled.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá smiled and hugged them. He said, “That’s the way I want you, boys, to act—be natural, be happy.”

When ‘Abdu’l-Bahá told them goodbye in December, he gave them a letter for their father, Arthur Dodge, a devout Bahá’í. He wrote, “Thy two happy sons have presented themselves to this blessed spot . . . The traces of the love of God are brilliantly manifested in their faces.”

Nearly 11 years later, in April 1912, the brothers and their parents met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s ship in New York. Wendell, a journalist, wrote an article about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that was published worldwide.

William built a career as a lawyer and judge. Speaking about his experiences at age 78, he said, “I am truly grateful for the sacred privilege of knowing and associating with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.”