

Telling my Story – Debbie

My parents were what some may call ‘non-Church-going’ Christians who had very deep love for Jesus. I was born in the 1960’s and went to a Church of England Primary school where every season was marked by stories from the Bible with all of the bad bits kept in. I knew at the age of five that God sent plagues, floods and famines; that King Herod massacred baby boys and that Jesus himself was subjected to torture, humiliation, and execution. I also learnt of forgiveness, dedication, faith, and kindness to strangers. My moral code was built on the teachings of Jesus.

At the age of 13 I decided that I must be an atheist. I struggled with the images I’d seen of God as an old man on a cloud. How could this old man have created the universe? Why were there so many different religions if there was only one God? Were so many millions of people wrong, and destined for Hell? And if God was already an old man, would he be dying soon like all the other old men? I found it hard to explore these adolescent questions as religion just wasn’t talked about in my circles back then.

We were in the Sixth Form when my best friend told me she had seen a float at the Lord Mayor’s Parade which bore the legend,

“The Earth is but One Country, And Mankind its Citizens”.¹

The banner belonged to a group called the Bahá’is, and she had looked them up in the phone book. There was a meeting called a Fireside that coming Friday, and would I go with her?

At that first fireside we were told that Bahá’is believe in the oneness of humanity, the equality of women and men, the importance of education, that prejudice of any kind is wrong. Baha’is believe that all religions come from the same Source – Almighty God – in a series referred to by Bahá’is as ‘Progressive Revelation’, and I did not have to give up my enduring love for Jesus. We learned that it was everyone’s own responsibility to search for truth and that service to humanity is one of our main purposes in life. We should each take responsibility for making the world a better place to live in, and the acquisition of virtues like honesty, kindness, patience and trust develop our souls for our progress in the spiritual realms beyond this earthly life.

These teachings made complete sense to me, confirming everything I had thought deep down for many years. The writings of Bahá’u’lláh were at once poetic, profound and unequivocal.

My last hurdle was acceptance of God, but it was explained that in Bahá’i beliefs God is the Unknowable Essence, infinite and eternal, essentially beyond the understanding of any human being yet at the same time ‘closer than our life vein.’ Understanding that that for Baha’i’s God is the name we give to the lifeforce within every aspect of creation was very liberating for me.

I became a member of the Bahá’i community in 1982 at the age of 18. My Faith has taken me to Mbabane, Eswatini, where I served as the first teacher (and Head Teacher) of the Bahá’i Primary School; to Haifa, Israel, on pilgrimage, and to many other places meeting Bahá’is from all parts of the world. Through being a Bahá’i I have felt true fellowship with people of many diverse beliefs and served with them in the promotion of religious understanding for the young people of the UK.

“Light is good in whatsoever lamp it is burning! A rose is beautiful in whatsoever garden it may bloom! A star has the same radiance if it shines from the East or from the West! Be free from prejudice; so will you love the Sun of Truth from whatever point in the horizon it may arise.”²

1. Báha’u’lláh, *Tablets of Bahá’u’lláh*, Lawh-i-Maqsúd)

2. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, quoted in *Bahá’u’lláh and the New Era*, J. E. Esslemont, US Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1980 edition