

Reflections on the Funeral of Ted Jefferson

My heart was full. Thus, I received permission from Dr. Roberts to write a few words about our beloved brother, Ted, and his home-going funeral and memorial service. I wanted to write not only because of my personal love for Ted but also because his brief gravesite funeral service was unlike any I have ever experienced. Now, after witnessing this service and then hearing many personal, heartfelt reflections during the following memorial program, I can only speak of him as a confirmed chosen one in the Cause of God, in spite of the earthly garment in which he was clothed, in spite of the gruffness in which he spoke to so many of us, and in spite of how our racially conditioned eyes perceived him.

Lift him up, my brothers, as a true sacrifice to our Lord. Indeed, Ted was an example for us to follow. His life has great relevance to our own, for no longer do we have to wonder whether our services to this Cause go unnoticed, whether our attempts to reflect Bahá'u'lláh's Light in all our endeavors are in vain, or whether our sacrifices for the Gathering and your past journeys to Bahia and African countries held enduring significance in the beloved eyes of the Universal House of Justice.

In the California mountains of Santa Cruz now lays the earthly shell of a man of African descent whose deeds gained him admittance into the Abhá' Kingdom, a once proud man who chose to overcome the adversities and confusions of this life by embracing, while on this earthly plane, the eternal refuge of the Ancient Beauty, our Lord.

Eternal thankfulness and gratitude surrounds the Gathering men (Oluyemi Thomas, Renaldo Raheim, and Tony Reid) who, with loving and humble devotion, ceremoniously washed and prepared Ted's body for burial. How does one characterize an act done in obedience to the command of God, an act that, in itself, marks their willful embracing of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings about the realities of the human spirit and sacredness of the human body, an act that demonstrated that they, too, had transcended the Christian traditions of our culture, but, most of all, an act of love that, they each say, was its own reward, because it carried them farther into the spiritual beauty and innumerable worlds of meaning Bahá'u'lláh has revealed?

How was the funeral service conducted, from my perspective? To begin, the setting was like mostly all graveside services. But, in this case, the grave was dug to enable the feet of Ted's mortal remains to face the Qiblih. A distinct group of young and middle-aged people, predominately Mexican-Indian (who I later learned were faculty and students at the alternative education school where Ted taught), gathered and stood quietly at that end, because the number of attendees, believers and non-believers alike, well exceeded the number of seats prepared under the canopied shade. Certainly, the attendance would have been even greater had the funeral service not been held on Monday, a work day.

The people were mixed in age and attire. They were of European, African, and again Mexican descent. There was such a diversity I doubt if anyone knew more than a fourth, or even less, of the other people there. I cannot recall whether women outnumbered men, or vice-versus, or the ratio of middle-aged to young and old. Yet, it seemed they all displayed a far-off gaze signifying confusion, sadness, questions, and uncertainties over a future without Ted. One can only wonder how a man, a Black man, a man we each thought we knew, could have deeply touched such a diversity of lives in the sterile spiritual environment of that bustling, mostly non-Black, city.

Although quiet conversations could be heard among the attendees, the setting was generally hushed as if each heart was grappling with something greater than just memories of Ted while waiting for his casket to be carried from the hearse. Perhaps they were grappling with the complexities of life, death, and love.

You must now understand that every detail of that beautiful and sacred moment was overseen by none other than our beloved Dr. Roberts, who represented the National Spiritual Assembly but also his own heart. For, he was one of Ted's dearest friends. You must believe me when I say that he brought with him that Institution's perfections, blessings, power, and grace, as well as its befittingly high, uncompromising standards that were sorely needed—something the Gathering men who observed the final planning will attest.

Nothing, absolutely nothing was neglected or forgotten. No traditional assumptions or customs that would result in the lowering of Ted's spiritual station were allowed to enter this service. We Gathering

Reflections on the Funeral of Ted Jefferson

men witnessed how the funeral home officials were educated in Billy's quiet, gentle, but firm way to understand that their usual procedures would not suffice. Even one highly proficient and intelligent Local Spiritual Assembly member involved in the planning was "educated", even publicly admonished due to his own attachments and inferior perceptions. It seems that unfortunate person, like most of us still, could not comprehend, or perhaps believe, that the burial of a Bahá'í, regardless of color or their perception of his or her earthly status, requires the highest protocols and standards of dignity, excellence, perfection of thought, sacrifice, and humility on every participant's part.

I know without any doubt that Ted's funeral and memorial service could not have attained its level of beauty and meaning without the powerful prayers of the NSA and the presence of its staunch designee. In the role of a devoted shepherd overseeing the final earthly wellbeing of a beloved member of a unique flock, Billy's uncompromising focus insured that Ted, that old lion, that roaring Gathering elder, that friend to so many lovers of God, would receive at that sacred moment the unblemished purity of Bahá'u'lláh's grace reserved for one's burial that had to be demonstrated through our every action and word.

Brothers, if I may say so, the preparations were so exacting it was as if 'Abdu'l-Bahá' Himself was present. Here is the example, the standard for us all to follow in order to truly distinguish our way from others. May those of us who attended maintain, cherish, and uphold the realities and standards of sacredness we witnessed Billy reflecting that day.

The honor of carrying Ted's casket was given to Bo Jack, Jamey Heath, two male youth from the local Bahá'í community, and two male youth from among the group of Ted's students in attendance.

When they slowly removed the casket from the hearse and began walking towards the open pit, two by two the Gathering men fell in behind that treasure, solemnly singing *Done made my vow to the Lord* until the casket was firmly resting on the straps that would soon lower it into the ground.

Understandably, my account from this point onward may be a little unclear. A torrent of questions pervaded my heart as I gazed at that simple wooden box lying in state before us. I do recall that the brothers were standing amidst the flowers contributed in Ted's memory and that we were facing Ute, Ted's mate and gentle fragrance, and the others who were seated under the canopy. Yet my thoughts were on what they were probably thinking—how can a burial service match their love for Ted? I only vaguely recall an LSA member saying preliminary words describing the order of the service, because I was dwelling upon whether the majority of those in attendance would appreciate the Bahá'í way of burying their dead. I do remember a dear friend of Ted's making repeated attempts to sing his favorite song—*Queen of Carmel*—due to the din of a nuisance, circling helicopter. Finally the airship went away and tearfully, she succeeded.

Then came the moment when all my heartfelt questions were answered and my confusion washed away. Billy, no, Dr. Roberts, who had been standing tall, purposeful, and hatless in the hot sun, like an Abha' angel empowered to guard a sacred trust, bent over with a prayer book in one hand and, with the other, stripped numerous soft, red petals from a proud, potted-rose plant near his feet. Repeating *Allah 'u' Abha'*, he approached the casket and sprinkled those now sacrificed petals its full length, thereby proclaiming to the whole universe and every soul in the heavens that there is no greater mortal beauty than a lover of Bahá'u'lláh. Returning to his original spot adjacent to the head of the casket, he raised his voice in recitation of the long *Prayer for the Departed*.

Brothers, who among us comprehends the relationship between that prayer and a believer's journey back to God? Certainly not this servant. Yet, I am now aware that there are no more meaningful and powerful words than those, which were raised in the name of God that sacred moment. I now pray that the culmination of my earthly life ends in the recitation of that prayer. For I now know that the true meaning of my life, of all human life, is mystically contained and revealed in its words.

Weeping is generally something strong Black men do not discuss. Did Dr. Roberts weep? Of course he did when swept away by the forces within that prayer. You could tell by his change of voice, but he

Reflections on the Funeral of Ted Jefferson

recovered well. Did the brothers weep? I don't know due to severely running eyes but, like me, they had to allow at least some tears to flow.

And then Dr. Roberts finished. To me, the spiritual reality of the world had stopped to listen to his voice, for I heard only those words of God reverberating in my mind and heart.

After a few moments, each pallbearer, one by one, placed the unopened rose they had previously been given on the casket. Then, as it commenced its slow descent, Dr. Roberts began softly singing *Allah 'u' Abha'*. The brothers composed themselves and picked up its soft melody, followed by the rest of the Baha'is. Singing *Allah 'u' Abha'* while watching those mortal remains slowly sink from view permanently instilled a new meaning to that greeting and goodbye.

Suffice it to say that every tear that drenched that sacred spot was its own, distinct expression of love, for this ceremony was about love—love of that now departed lover of God and love for the beauty of God which give his life purpose.

Flowers were, of course, dropped onto the casket. Slowly the Bahá'is and others drifted away to their cars in order to drive to the location of the memorial service up the hill. Not everyone left; Ted's students and co-faculty members (20-25) had decided to stay behind in order to have their own private ceremony in the manner of their Mexican-Indian traditions.

The few brothers who had not yet gone followed Billy back to the gravesite in order to silently, respectfully, participate by our presence. We stood somewhat in awe watching a young girl leaning over the curtained partition into the grave pit, weeping and praying, with yearning outstretched arms, in words we did not understand. Here, indeed, was another broken heart.

Upon arising, she lit a piece of sage and, with its smoke, blessed, from head to toe, every person who, by then, had encircled Ted's burial site.

A faculty member, who I was later informed was the Headmaster of Ted's school, then stepped forward and spoke. You could easily tell this Mexican-American man deeply and profoundly loved Ted. He spoke softly, sometimes haltingly as Indians do. There were no notes in his hand, no prepared speech, just words streaming from his heart. Of the many things he uttered in English, I can only remember; Here lies a king. And we brothers had dared to think we had actually known Ted.

Lift Ted up, my brothers, in your hearts and thoughts. I believe you can place him in that realm reserved for heroes of God. No, of course he wasn't a martyr. Instead, he was a pioneer that journeyed into the lofty heights of the human spirit. He was once an ordinary, smart, but still ordinary Black man who became transformed into an obedient, spiritual warrior by the power of our Lord—transformed to the extent he was able to live the Bahá'í life as Bahá'u'lláh instructed us all to do. He was a reflected light that spread the love of God freely among the peoples of the world. He was a defender of truth, one appreciably biased relative to the oppressed of the earth.

Why should you believe these things? During the following memorial service, Dr. Roberts, while giving the official eulogy, read a message sent by the Highest Body on this planet—the Universal House of Justice. In so many words, it is praying Ted's soul through the worlds of God.

Lift Ted up, O brothers, in your thoughts. What greater spiritual bounty could one receive than to have one's journey back to God ushered by the prayers of the Universal House of Justice—that still mysterious Body 'Abdu'l-Bahá' stated He would be the first to bow down to?

Lift Ted up, O Brothers. By doing so, it seems we all will be breaking more of those insidious bonds that suppress our own souls.

There was also a long, eloquent, and loving letter from our National Spiritual Assembly concerning Ted, which Dr. Roberts also read. He then gave his own non-exaggerated perception of Ted's life and contributions to this Cause, including a humorous account of Ted's first journey to Africa. Following, personal testimony after testimony, poems and loving memories of Ted were given, sometimes tearfully,

Reflections on the Funeral of Ted Jefferson

during this service expertly moderated by Tony Reid. Although, as Dr. Roberts stated in his eulogy, Ted lived humbly, apparently Ted was indeed wealthy where it truly counts.

Much more needs to be said about Dr. Roberts' eulogy. Actually, every word of it needs to be placed upon this page. If only I could remember... What I do recall, however, is the melody of Ted Dr. Roberts sung that day. It was a unique song written only for Ted. There were no notes which sounded off-key when comparing them to Ted's life; no flowery arrangements or soaring crescendos to mask Ted's harsh edges that Dr. Roberts, instead, pointed out. Yet, it had a consistent background chorus of tender, sweet sounds. Its rhythm was steady, sometimes loud, like Ted's demeanor. Its solo embraced listeners' hearts with loving, intimate words that only someone who truly knew him could sing. To me, it was a eulogy worthy of being scrolled up and read aloud to introduce Ted to each world of God he travels.

Yes, other brothers had a formal role in the program: Al Fox opened the service by beautifully reading the prayer *From the Sweet-Scented Streams...*; Nasif recited the prayer Ted always prayed during the Gathering—*the Tablet of Ahmad*. Ask Nasif if he could recite that prayer in his usual manner.

Overall, the tone and pitch of the memorial service was joyous, as all home-goings for Bahá'is should be. There was humor—not just sadness, laughter—not just tears. “I only want to make people happy,” is something I recall Ted saying.

Finally, also interwoven in Billy's mission was the objective of insuring that Ute, Ted's consort, would have no blemish of sadness or regret whenever she reflected upon how the burial of her mate was conducted. With our own eyes, we saw her clouds of sadness and uncertainty forever banished. Essentially she became happy, even radiant that day.

So, my Brothers, this is my account of Ted's home-going. One can only ask, did Ted leave an indelible mark on our souls, or not? Of course, the answer can only be, Yes.

James Williams
10/7/2004