

KAHLIL GIBRAN

The wizard of rhetoric

MAHFUZ UL HASIB CHOWDHURY

The Prophet by Kahlil Gibran (1883-1931) is a marvelous book with the magical power of enthraling readers with poetic quotes on all aspects of life divine, still so lifelike. The fabulous depiction of Al Mustafa, "the chosen and the beloved" who is the Prophet, loved and honoured by his people for years, is expected to illuminate the minds of millions with his sagacity and with the divinity of a true apostle. The warm ovation he received from his countrymen is described in the following exclusive mellifluous lines by Gibran, "A noontide have you been in our twilight and your youth has given us dreams to dream.....you have walked among us a spirit, and your shadow has been a light upon our faces." These verses display how much the prophet was adored and awaited by his masses. I can't help quoting a few other words said by the priests and priestesses to sublimate the prophet, "Much have we loved you. But speechless was our love.....yet now it cries aloud unto you, and stand revealed before you"; and then we come across a classic aphorism that could only be crafted by Kahlil Gibran, "And ever has it been that love knows not its own depth until the hour of separation."

The profound vision of Gibran delving deep into myriad aspects of life has made *The Prophet* an overwhelming masterpiece, as if the readers are walking through a large orchard with lots of trees bending down with ripe, mellow, fragrant fruits and flowers making it difficult to decide which one to pick. Such is the grandeur of Gibran's diction. His neatly chosen words astound readers with a lovely diversity of discourses on all earthly matters that the human mind can ponder on. It is the unique style of Kahlil Gibran sewing up spiritualism in the finest ever poetic way through the folds of worldliness.

The Prophet's heavenly voice jingles with a moving tone as he speaks of love to the audiences, "For even as love crowns you so shall he crucify you. Even as he is for your growth so is he for your pruning.....like the sheaves of corn he gathers you unto himself. He threshes you to make you naked. He sifts you to free you from your husks.....He kneads you until you are pliant; and then he assigns you to his sacred fire, that you may become sacred bread for God's sacred feast."

If one wing of love bears the signs of pleasure, another rings in a perpetual melody of pain. Perhaps that is the message Gibran extends to us all. Love is a constant ambiguity; it's a simultaneous fount of smile and tears abreast, an everlasting symphony of mirth and remorse.

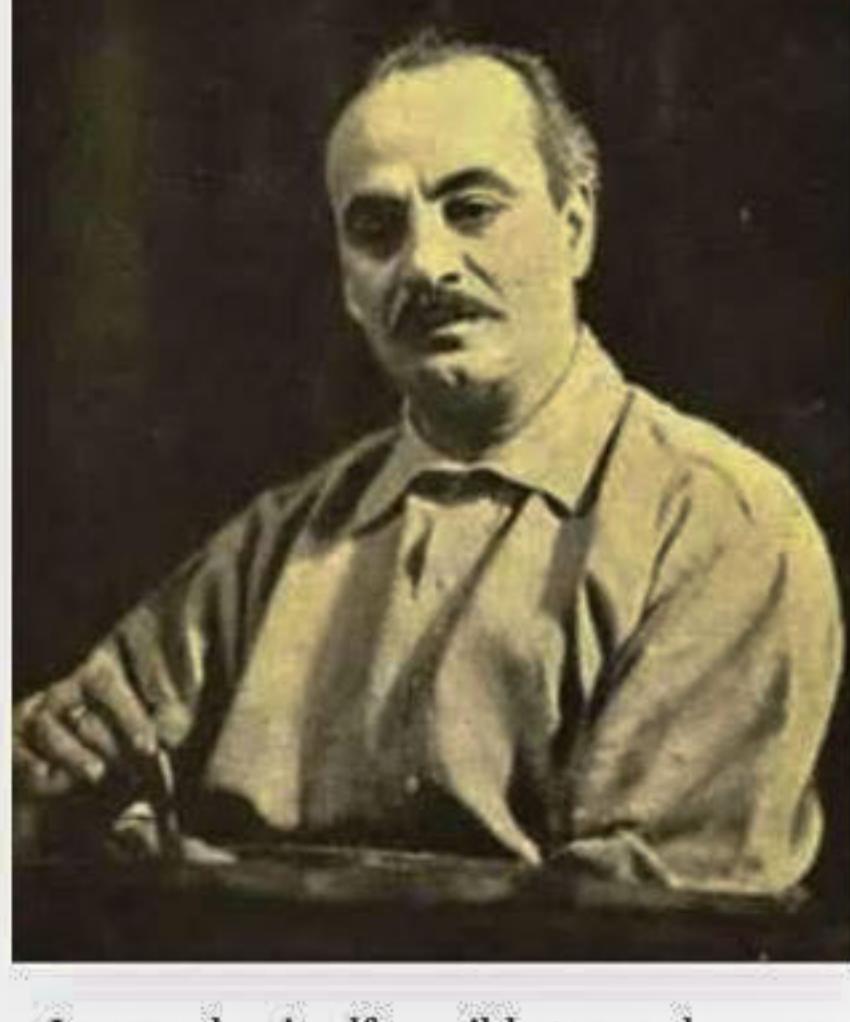
Love, Gibran says, values the individualism of human souls. Even love between a married couple must leave a little space in the middle of two hearts. Let's try to have a feel of the way Gibran versifies it, "Love one another, but make not a bond of love. Let it rather be a moving sea between the shores of your souls.....give one another of your bread but eat not from the same loaf....even as the strings of a lute are alone though they quiver with the same music.....and stand together yet not too near.....for the pillars of the temple stand apart....."

Gibran's words on children are equally gratifying to thoughtful minds. "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.....you may house their bodies but not their souls. For their

souls dwell in the house of tomorrow which you cannot visit, not even in your dreams.....you are the bows from which your children as living arrows are sent forth."

Kahlil Gibran views children as the path leading to the door of tomorrow, as a beacon calling us to explore the future with new hope and dreams like the way Walt Whitman boasted of his 'tan-faced children' in the poem 'Pioneer' as an immense power that would lead America to a new dawn.

Kahlil Gibran elevates work to the level of a divine pursuit. He denounces idleness saying, "For to be idle is to become a stranger unto the seasons, and to step out of life's procession that marches in majesty and proud submission towards the infinite". Work with the essence of integrity rises to the height of offering prayers to God while indolence alienates humans from the real exuberance of life. This sense is further consolidated in his verses, "And when you work with love you bind yourself to yourself, and to one another, and to God". Work is superb power in having the chorus of life resonate in unison with our fellow human beings and their congregated sweat and toils reach God in the heavens above. "Work is love made visible".



Love makes itself tangible to us when we work not just with our heads, but with our hearts too.

The Prophet's discourses on joy and sorrow are once again filled with the same ornamental rhetoric and enriched with his philosophic vision. He begins his speech with an evocative line, "Your joy is your sorrow unmasked." Sorrow is coated with a bitter taste, but as its outer shell erodes the sweet crux inside gradually makes its way out and that's what we call joy. Gibran reminds me of John Donne, the best-known English metaphysical poet, as I read with wonder his marvelous metaphors and striking conceits. About joy and sorrow he further says, "Together they come and when one sits alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep upon your bed." Weal and woe come by turns that's what Gibran means to convey to us. Let us not get carried away with the vigorous stream of joy, neither should we allow sorrow to have us dispirited when it prolongs to test our patience and to try the strength of our faith in the Almighty as He is the one that sends down both. "And is not the lute that soothes your spirit the very wood that was hollowed with knives?" So, isn't sorrow indispensable to make us hug life like an invaluable treasure when the cloud of tough time clears up and the rays of a brighter daybreak kiss the windowpane?

Kahlil Gibran's visualization of God through the image of humans is sketched in forms of beautifully woven words in another two outstanding books by him *The Madman* and *The Earth Gods*. Gibran's splendid verses continue to mesmerize readers while he quests for God's entity in mankind in these two books. In *The Earth Gods* Gibran narrates a sublime conversation between three alter egos of God the First God, Second God and Third God. We find them speaking of the blooming of life, the beauty of spring and youth and this is how their words become a universal bunch of dialogues. The three alter egos of God converse with each other over the significance of humans' faith in one true God as well as the representation of God through humans in the following way as stated by Gibran:

*In man we seek a mouthpiece,
And in his life our self fulfillment.
Whose heart shall echo our voice if the
human heart is deafened with dust?
Who shall behold our shining if man's eye is
blinded with night?*

*And what would you do with man, child of
our earliest heart, our own self image?*

God's soliloquies with Himself about His replenishing bonds with humans are put forward by Gibran as given below:

*You would not abandon him
Who strives to reach you through gladness
and through pain.
You would not turn away your face from the
need in his eye.*

God's benevolence towards the well-being of mankind is movingly presented in the above extract. Kahlil Gibran's works somehow act as an awakening and for this reason he was adorably known as the Immortal Prophet of Lebanon. Delighting readers was one of the prime pursuits of Gibran, simultaneously the ethical messages conveyed through his words are extremely emphatic, solemn and didactic. His first book in English *The Madman* makes valiant efforts to throw away the fetters of conventional thoughts to restructure our vision of life and other aspects that life involves. The reciprocity between man and God is demonstrated by Gibran in the line in *The Madman* that says:

*I am thy yesterday and thou art my
tomorrow. I am thy root in the earth and thou
art my flower in the sky and together we grow
before the face of the sun.*

Kahlil Gibran in *The Madman* traces the emanation of God through the surroundings that encompass us everywhere in the following lines:

*Then God leaned over me, and in my ears
whispered words of sweetness and even as the
sea that enfoldeth a brook that runneth down
to her, He enfolded me.*

*And when I descended to the valleys and the
plains, God was there also.*

Kahlil Gibran, as it appears from his writings, endeavoured to discover the hidden and genuine meaning of human life, which an average mind cannot trace, an average eye cannot view. And while doing so, he referred to humans' spiritual ties with God over and over again. In his works we come across a profound and venturesome dive into the realms of human thoughts, actions, achievements and failures and his immortal literary creations have transformed him into a poet and author for all eras and for all races of mankind.

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LETTER FROM BOSTON

The paradoxes of living in exile

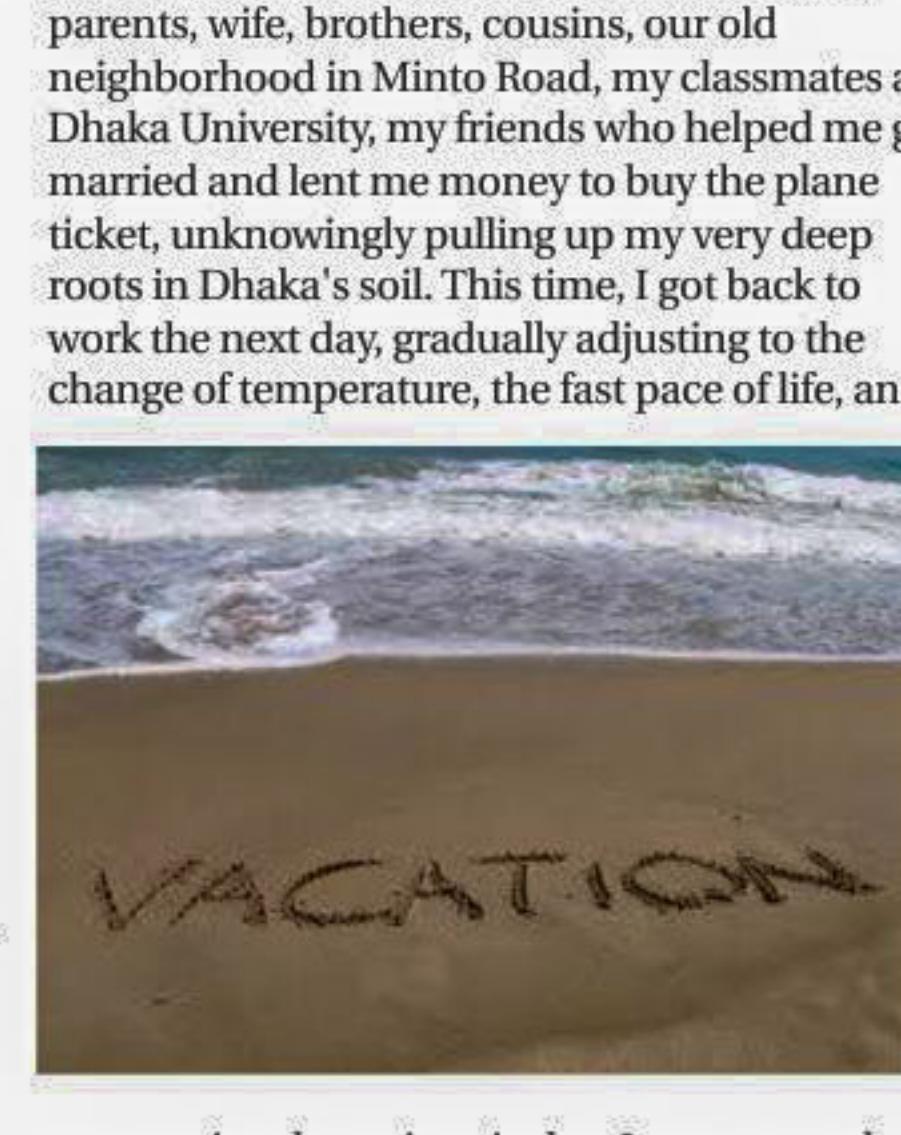
ABDULLAH SHIBLI

I just got back from Dhaka after a short visit. Ironically, my planned short visit also turned into one of the longest vacations I have taken in recent memory. And, if you ask, yes, it was a true vacation since I did not do much, except read some books, during most of the three weeks that I was in Dhaka. More about that later in this letter, but I have to concede that on my return to the USA at JFK airport in New York, the biggest challenge I faced as soon as I stepped out of the airplane was the cold weather. It is nice to getaway, particularly from the frigid and snowy landscape of New England, during winter, but the downside of this getaway is the shock of readjustment that awaits you when you come back once the vacation is over.

As most of my fellow compatriots living in the diaspora will agree, Dhaka is like heaven in January, while Boston--or Toronto, for that matter--is like hell (well I exaggerate a little bit here) in January or February, particularly after you have enjoyed the milder weather in Dhaka. While I was in Dhaka, one of the most frequently asked questions posed to me was, "So what is the weather like in Boston now?" My short response, given with a lot of face twisting, grimacing, and other facial expressions is, "cold". For others, I try to come up with a more appropriate description: "miserable". I am not sure if my interlocutors understood what I mean by the word miserable, but I could tell from their eyes that some of them didn't believe me. Their body language, and sometimes their explicit verbal riposte were, "Then why go back to that misery?" Good question, I would have said or as Hamlet might have said, "Aye, there's the rub". I would like to concede that I search often for the answer to that question, and I am not sure if I have found the real answer. But that's a conversation I will have another day, I suppose.

Now let me come back to the realities that awaited me on my return to Boston. From JFK, I

soon was on my way to Boston, and I will say I felt a little more comfortable when we reached Boston's Logan Airport, but I don't know why. One reason might be that I now consider Boston my home base; where I first arrived many, many years ago, leaving my near and dear ones, my parents, wife, brothers, cousins, our old neighborhood in Minto Road, my classmates at Dhaka University, my friends who helped me get married and lent me money to buy the plane ticket, unknowingly pulling up my very deep roots in Dhaka's soil. This time, I got back to work the next day, gradually adjusting to the change of temperature, the fast pace of life, and



overcoming the serious jet lag. I went to work on Saturday, tried to get back into the swing of things, and get on with life. I fished out my warm winter gloves, dusted off my winter boots, brought out my thermal undergarments, etc. etc. Well, you get the picture! Before I left for Dhaka, I just casted those away without any thought that I'd need them again ever. Now I am glad I did not toss them in the trash barrel, which I could have easily done before I was leaving for Bangladesh. I was in a "couldn't care less" state of mind, since I was going to Bangladesh where the winter temperature never goes below 45 and the air is crisp but very pleasant in winter. And I was not disappointed since I was walking around in shirt sleeves and slacks during my whole stay. I even took

morning walks on the roof every morning in my sleeping pajamas. (I have to admit that I needed hot water for showers, but that was only a minor inconvenience).

The reentry was not too unpleasant after the initial woe off, considering, given that the winter has been snowless so far, almost like last year (see my column, "Waiting for Snow", Daily Star, March 17, 2012). But it takes a while to get back into the full rhythm of our life in exile. The driving, housecleaning, laundry, grocery shopping, cooking, etc. come back gradually, almost like the missing pieces of a jigsaw puzzle! Admittedly, a few times you trip up, missing a beat here and there, trying to remember this and that, as you try to reconfigure the routine for the weekends, or the TV shows to watch and radio stations to listen to. But once in a while the sweet memories (or you could characterize them as the "aftertaste") of the trip to Dhaka flash back, along with a few regretthings you forgot to do, or to buy, or places you could not visit during the trip. But, on the other hand, there were many things I enjoyed NOT DOING while in Dhaka: checking my messages on the cell phone (I had a borrowed one but it was stolen from my pocket at Azad Mosque), checking email every few minutes on the computer, watching hours and hours of sports on TV, or jumping in the car whenever you have a few extra minutes to run small errands. Obviously, there were other pleasant adjustments I make during these trips. Most notably, my dietary habits changed a little bit, going from three Spartan meals a day in exile to multiple, often rich, meals in Dhaka. But, I also enjoyed the variety which I am starting to miss here: guava, pitahas, fish fries, various legumes (shak), and the infinite variety of various chatnis and bhartas. Well, maybe I will check them out when I am at the local Indian grocery store next time.

DR. ABDULLAH SHIBLI LIVES AND WORKS IN BOSTON.

SHORT STORY

Servant . . . or savior

KAY

Home help are fairly common in our part of the world. They come in different ranges of salaries, depending on skills and age. The under-aged child workers are addressed as "Chhemri" and "Beti" (in Bangla) used for sweeping or odd jobs. They are called "buas" or "chakrani" if they are cooks or house cleaners. Some employers from cultured families refer to old servants as "apas" or "didis" depending on their age and the level of intimacy earned over the years of service

Renuka treats her home help with affection and respect. She calls her Rahilla, which is her real name. She was appointed on a contract of fixed working hours, four days off a month and an annual leave to return to her village home.

Rahilla was quick at learning. Soon she knew how to use the vacuum cleaner, then the washing machine and the electric cooker. In the kitchen she mastered the art of Indian and western cuisine. She could turn out a baked lasagna with a perfect golden crust on top and her kachchi biryani was a great hit with Renuka's friends who often gathered in her home for meetings or a togetherness.

Rahilla served the guests with delectable dishes but kept herself in the kitchen despite requests from the mistress and the guests to join them.

The servant-master distance remained intact as a principle followed by Rahilla, who often reiterated that "servants must know their place".

Renuka often indulged in self disclosure to Rahilla, sharing her childhood memories, her interesting life events and her ambition to set up a contractual service for domestic helpers.

Renuka worked with the press. She reported cases of violence against women and domestic workers. The information was published for the public.

Sometimes she read these out to Rahilla, venting her anger against the cruel employers who violated their maidservants. She thought they deserved the severest of punishment.

Renuka informed her of the country's laws that included punishment to employers if they were found guilty of violating a house help. In certain cases they were charged the penalty of a huge fine.

Rahilla was curious. How much were they fined? Her intelligence demanded more details, "but how did they verify?"

Proof is possible with witness, with doctors certificates and various other ways. Rahilla exclaimed, "How shameful! How can a servant complain against a master provider? A servant must know her rightful place, which is fidelity to her master or mistress."

Renuka said some masters deserved the punishment; they should be exposed in public for their crimes.

She felt good in sharing her views with Rahilla, even in confiding in her her sorrow about her husband who often left her to travel elsewhere. There were rumours he had remarried. Renuka indulged in self disclosure. Rahilla listened but rarely talked about herself, although it was a known fact that her husband Selim paid customary calls on her and did not support her financially.

Rahilla felt it was not the servant's place to get too intimate with the mistress. She was particular about her status as a servant and carried herself with the professional dignity of a service provider, keeping a respectful distance from the mistress, indulging in little self disclosure even when the mistress felt close to her. She hesitated to open up with her personal problems to her mistress.

Rahilla lived by her belief in the natural class gap between servant and master. She felt she was employed on certain terms of service and she was satisfied to abide by those terms. She kept to those terms of reference and knew her place as a service provider.

Years passed in their lives in this harmonious discipline. Parties were hosted and Rahilla produced delectable dishes. The guests praised and Renuka took the bows. Rahilla kept in the background. The whole house moved on well oiled wheels, as it were, run by Rahilla in all reality.

As time passed, Renuka had nothing to do with the home. She spent time mostly outside the country, attending conferences or seminars. Renuka was not young any more. Meetings and friendships brought strength to her and Rahilla's faithful service was a contribution that kept her going. However, Renuka's doctors had suspected a virus that was leading to cancer which might lead to her life being cut short.

Knowing this Renuka took the necessary precautions of medication as well as settling bank accounts to be taken care of in case of her death.

Rahilla was not made aware of this although she accompanied the mistress on her visits to the doctor as well to the bank.

The gap between the mistress and servant was barely noticeable. Rahilla was always well dressed and well groomed. In fact, when she answered the doorbell, the messengers often mistook her for the mistress.

Rahilla had a passion for reading news and listening to the television for any new turns in the political situation. Literacy classes she attended at Renuka's insistence benefited her because she could now use her time well in reading books. They watched television together sometimes and Rahilla often voiced her disgust at the destruction she viewed, the burning of buses and killings in the name of claiming "Rights".

Renuka listened to her with respect.

Opinions were shared on education of men and women, on peaceful living and on mea-

sures against violence.

Renuka was working on a development project and Rahilla's views seemed valuable to her. Renuka was not without a family. Her husband had separated from her. Her son worked overseas. She heard from him infrequently and often requested him to return and live with her as she was alone and missed him. She had a married daughter who lived in another part of the city. Her daughter called her now and then on the phone but said she had little time from housework and childcare to drop in often to be with her. However, she was dutiful and brought all the medicines she needed and sent her car for the mother to visit the doctor whenever that was required.

Renuka so far had been grateful to God that she could carry on her own without being a burden on her family. The doctor's verdict that she had a mortal illness was a shock to her. She worried about the brevity of life when she had so much to do and such little time in hand.

Often when the mistress was sick or in pain, Rahilla would bring a bottle of herbal oil and massage her to soothe the pain. One day when Rahilla looked unwell the mistress asked her what was the matter. She complained of a backache. Rahilla made her sit down so that she could massage her with oil. Rahilla would hear nothing of it. She said, "I will take a pill. It will go. How can I, your servant, take service from you? I know my place."

Despite treatment and care, Renuka was growing weak and losing interest in life. She was seen visiting mazars and attending milads with a frequency that surprised her children.

Renuka was sure of her death. In her usual practical way she had bought and stored all the items needed for the eventuality of her demise as a Muslim, such as Kaffoor Agarbatti, Chadar Candles and copies of the Quran Shareef and Jai Namaz. She felt it was important to visit her bank for declaration of nominees to gift her property and bank balance to those who outlived her.

As her mistress grew sick with the incurable disease, she became completely dependent on Rahilla's care. Rahilla also kept another woman to help her with the washing and cleaning. She also employed a maulvi to recite the Quran every day for the recovery of her mistress.

Rahilla informed both the children of their mother's condition. The daughter came once and expressed satisfaction at the way their mother was being looked after. Renuka longed to hold her daughter close and have her stay the night with her but she knew her daughter was too busy with her family. The daughter put her arms around her mother and said, "Maa, you have the best daughter in Rahilla. I am so glad she is with you."

The son was on a job that required tours abroad. He wrote letters but was unable to visit her.

Renuka knew her time had come. She was now dying. The room was lit with candles as there had been an electric failure in the house. The helpful hands of Rahilla were always there at her slightest need. She was close to her needs till her last breath. Renuka could not control her tears as she helped. Feeling the pain of separation, Rahilla felt her life emptying without a mistress who was also her best friend.

Renuka died in peace, at the caring hands of her house help.