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 LARGE PRINT / Standard Print.*Why I became a Bahá'í* 

## The Very Long Journey ... or why I became a Bahá'í.

I HAVE, PROBABLY, always been a Bahá'í. It is just that I never knew it! So let me start at the beginning. My Dad, who came from a strong Plymouth Brethren background, died during the war when I was two. But he left a note to me that stated that I should not just automatically become a Plymouth Brethren but, instead, should, when older, investigate and think for myself and make up my own mind as to the truth! Naturally I knew nothing of this until much later!

At four I was sent to a boarding school. After three years I, still with quite a strong regional accent disliked and looked down upon greatly by the school, was, for a year or two, put into a class of "foreigners" who did not speak English! How now brown cow! It was a very happy class and we all got on like a house on fire. My classmates were mainly drawn from India, Pakistan, Africa and the Middle East and all were Muslim or Hindu. Every Sunday we went to the school Church of England compulsory service and, at one such service, vividly recall a white saintly minister, standing tall in the pulpit, crying out against the infidels! These were my friends he was talking about! Surely this was the preaching of hatred? Yet most of those present neither noticed nor seemed to care! It was as though, even at that young age, all were being conditioned, all words just taken for granted for if it were preached it must be true! Surely that couldn't be right? It was many months later that it also struck me that, until that totally divisive sermon, I had never really noticed the different colours of skin, the different accents, the different mannerisms. Had not these differences brought more colours into my life?

After the very nasty and messy divorce of my mother and stepfather, my mother went into deep, sometimes suicidal, depressions as the stress and financial problems of being a single parent mother got to her and the pain was eased with alcohol. We children spent hours playing the game called "searching for the bottle" for alcoholics can be extremely devious. The lesson to all of us young children was that the drinking of alcohol surely couldn't be right! Where was the support? Where was the help? Many a holiday was spent either at school or with one particular friend, a Yemeni, and the time was spent in their house in London where the parents and many other, mainly Arab, visitors would leave the table and pray on their mats at the appointed hours, not minding this little English boy playing around the room. Regretfully my friend died fighting for the Yemeni Royals when aged 17. When older, I fled, when I legally could, I went off to sea in the Merchant Navy.

There again as I travelled worldwide, it became more and more apparent that regardless of colour, race and creed, all had the same worries and aspirations, all were concerned for their families, and only the minority ever wanted war. Those being mainly men.

All wanted an opportunity for true education. I remember being taken as a young green cadet to the "cages", the worst brothel area in Bombay, and there drinking a coke, as I waited for my more senior officer, and talked, in English, to this prostitute. Her only wish was to see her son and daughter educated. Everything she did, she did for these children. The ships themselves were like a floating mini United Nations with seamen from Hindu India, engineers from Muslim Pakistan, cooks and stewards from the then Roman Catholic Portuguese province of Goa (now part of India). There was no animosity, a lot of laughter, tolerance and above all a vital element needed on a ship that of trust. We worked together

we played together, and I was absolutely convinced, that when we prayed we must have also been praying to the same God for nothing else, for me, could make sense!

But how did all these things link together? Was one religion better than the other? If the virtues and words of the various religious books were roughly the same, surely then there must be a common factor? But what was it?

Whilst I had written poetry at school, I had never subsequently put pen to paper. Then, due to a rather amazing coincidence of being available when no one else was, I found myself as a late desperate replacement as a Tyneside Poet on an officially invited visit to the Soviet Union in the era of the Cold War. As we flew into Moscow, Pravda wrote that "today sees the visit of some of England's finest poets" – and I was one of them! This was the era of suspicion, the height of propaganda, the teaching of hatred of one nation to another, the stockpiling of nuclear arsenals and a build up of massed armed forces together with the ever-increasing world tensions. Yet as I travelled, visiting the length and breadth of the old Soviet Union I saw no hatred (save that directed towards the corrupted Communist system). All rather asked why my country hated them? Why my country wanted to bomb them? Why my country wanted to hurt their families, their children?

Such is the power of an evil media on both sides; the slow stoking of hatreds by politicians, the pressure of the then arms race, and the terrible beliefs that one is better than another. My mind was very jumbled up. How should it all link together? There must be a way and did anyone else in the world think as I did? Did anyone have a true answer? As I travelled I listened and saw. It was in the Soviet Union, in some small ways, I first saw at work the partial equality of men and women, unlike the then UK, and I had liked what I had seen.

The years sped by and my brown hair changed to speckled and then grey and, whilst wiser, I still knew of no answer. For a short time I acted as a lay preacher but found great difficulty in the understanding that the only way to God was through Christ. That alone could never ever be true for Christ spoke of love and peace, not of disunity and hatred, unless, perhaps, all was put into some sort of time frame but still it didn't make sense. In Los Angeles, in 2001, I discovered paddle tennis. I like paddle tennis for you can just turn up alone and you will always be welcome onto a court, for others are always looking to make up a foursome or pair. All nationalities play together. You don't have to be very good to enjoy a game and your poor standard is aided and improved by those better without acrimony. I was sitting out a game and my new lady partner listened quietly as I ranted on about the state of our one small planet. She turned. She smiled beautifully. She spoke, "Will you come with me to what we call a fireside?" She talked to me. She read to me. We read together. We had endless discussions. Within a few brief weeks it was with great joy and with massive relief at last, I became a Bahá'í.

Bahá'í love and greetings,  
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