

A True Champion: Zachariah Williams by Druzelle Cederquist

I hear the word “champion” used these days, not so often in the sense of a fighter pitched *against* an opponent, but more often in the sense of an advocate who defends, supports, fights *for* a person or cause. Like a familiar super-hero, a true champion can emerge in the guise of the neighbor who lives next door. Like Zachariah (Zach) Williams, for example, who was named to receive the Dr. David S. Ruhe Champion of Humanity Award at this year’s Northeast Baha’i Youth Conference.

The Award carries these words of Baha’u’llah: “The companions of God are, in this day, the lump that must leaven the peoples of the world. They must show forth such trustworthiness, such truthfulness and perseverance, such deeds and character that all mankind may profit by their example.”

On Sunday evening Zach’s family walked on stage to receive the honor on his behalf. What should have been an occasion of joy was bittersweet. Zach’s life had been cut short in a December icy-weather road accident. Stopping to assist another motorist, he had been struck by a car and died instantly. Zach was 21. One of my own sons is 21 and my parental heart ached for Zach’s parents. But to let sorrow be the end of this story would miss the point.

For those of us who did not know Zach, filmmaker Frank Robinson showed a montage of interviews with those who did (Video: part one and part two). What became clear was that the honor bestowed on Zachariah Williams was not about his death, but about the remarkably rich spirit he brought to his life – and into the lives of so many others. One after another came the stories of how Zach had encouraged, inspired, loved them. How each, so many of them youth, had felt embraced by Zach.

What the film brought home to those of us gathered there was the priceless value of one life, how widely it ripples out, how many precious connections it creates. That Zach’s death came in the midst of an act of service – of leaving comfort and safety to assist a fellow traveler whose name he did not even know – gives a clear reading of how Zach lived his life every day. His aspirations were lofty, his character sterling, and best of all, his love was real.

I need to mention that Zach was both a Baha’i and a young black man. Because you must know that even now it is unusual for a room of 1,000 mostly white Americans to honor a young black man in this way. Because you need to know that in the Baha’i Faith there are people of color at every level of service and responsibility, who are role models for the rest of us as we work together to untie the racial knots that bind us. Our insights can grow from the simplest words, when the words are divinely-inspired.

These words of ‘Abdu’l-Baha, for example, from a letter written in the early 20th century to another American of African descent. “O thou who art pure in heart, sanctified in spirit, peerless in character, beautiful in face! . . . Thou art dark in countenance and bright in character. Thou art like unto the pupil of the eye which is dark in color, yet it is the fount of light and the revealer of the contingent world.” (See a multimedia presentation on this quote.)

The pupil of the eye – a simple true image. Yet when had black Americans ever before heard their color defined as a fountain of light? Or feel honored for the beauty they carried within? Or recognized for what their color could represent?

Yet color is an attribute of this world – the world Zach has left behind. The greater comfort that soothes our grief over Zach comes from the greater clarity of Baha'i sacred writings in answer to our questions about life beyond the life we know. The basic truths have a familiar ring, for they resonate with the divine guidance of religion in every age, while new teachings from Baha'u'llah open whole new vistas.

Death is not annihilation but a messenger of joy, say Baha'i scriptures. It is the birth of the soul from one world of God to the next, like the birth of a child from the world of the womb into this world. While the physical body remains here, in the world to which it belongs, the soul at the moment of death moves on to its true home – like a bird breaking free of its cage to soar in the limitless heavens.

Our fears of the unknown are addressed with loving counsels from the one Creator: "O Son of Man! Thou art My dominion and My dominion perisheth not, wherefore fearest thou thy perishing? Thou art My light and My light shall never be extinguished; why dost thou dread extinction? Thou art My glory and My glory fadeth not; thou art My robe and My robe shall never be outworn. Abide then in thy love for Me, that thou mayest find me in the realm of glory."

And what can we expect in the life beyond? While the next life is not nearly as far removed as we might imagine, say Baha'i writings, the mysteries of such a vastly different realm escape description. The very language we must use is attached to the limits of the world in which we live. Nevertheless, there are some truths that can be shared, that give us the flavor of paradise.

The faithful soul "shall, after his ascension, be possessed of such power that all the worlds which the Almighty hath created can benefit through him," declared Baha'u'llah. "Such a soul . . . furnisheth the power through which the arts and wonders of the world are made manifest." "The light which these souls radiate is responsible for the progress of the world and the advancement of its peoples. . . . Through them the clouds rain their bounty upon man, and the earth bringeth forth its fruits."

Paradise as a place of champions – friends for humankind. Now that's something I could see Zach getting into. Because Zach was always a soul filled with love, for those he knew, and for those whose names he did not need to know.

Videos by by Frank Robinson Jr.

Baha'i Quotation References: Advent of Divine Justice, p.23; Selected Writings of 'Abdu'l-Baha, p.114; Hidden Words, Arabic #14; Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, p.161, p.156-7