

Nabil Yazdani

May 14, 2021 1:13:00

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Diversity and inclusivity, Culture shock, Immigrant, Wealth inequality, 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh, Bahá'í faith, Spiritual Assembly, COVID-19, Food distribution, Community engagement, Interfaith, The University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Suriname

SPEAKERS

Aysha Moneer, Nabil Yazdani

A Aysha Moneer 00:01

Great. Hi, this is Aysha Moneer. I am an oral historian with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. Today is May 14th and I am with Nabil Yazdani. I'll go ahead and let you introduce yourself and tell us where you're taking your call from.

N Nabil Yazdani 00:21

Yes. My name is Nabil Yazdani, and I am forty-six years old. I've lived in Austin since 1992. When I came here as a student at the University of Texas, I grew up in a small country called Suriname, which is on the northeastern coast of South America. [Suriname] is a Dutch speaking country. I've lived there since I was two. My family's from Iran, and I was born there as well.

A Aysha Moneer 01:08

To start, tell me a bit about your childhood and some formative experiences growing up.

N Nabil Yazdani 01:20

My first memories were from Suriname, where my parents moved to. My parents had always had this notion that they could be wherever in the world and feel at home. That

sentiment is informed by the teachings of the Bahá'í faith that says that the Earth is one country and mankind its citizens. So, my parents made it a point to have us jump in and integrate wherever we were. One example that I remember pretty well - we lived in the capital city and they had asked around, "Where are good schools?" Somebody told us to go to this particular school and [my parents] enrolled us there, and my brother and I went to school there. After about a year or two, my parents quickly looked around and noticed that everyone at our school was either a kid of a diplomat or someone well-off - it was a private school. That was not the cross section - [the] Surinamese were not going to those schools. So, they unenrolled us and had us attend public schools from then on. Their point of view was that we live here and we should - they weren't looking to be exclusive - they were looking to be part of society. Even though they were outsiders coming in. That's sort of been the goal. My growing up years were about trying to fit in. I was trying to be a part of. It's a role that I'm fairly comfortable with, just reading the room and trying to figure out what's going on and then joining in.

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Aysha Moneer 03:42

Before we started, we were talking about how in Suriname there is no majority ethnic group. So, when you're talking about this experience of wanting to fit in, a common experience growing up - did your identity fit in as well? Whether nationality or ethnicity - how did that play out in your environment?

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Nabil Yazdani 04:09

Yeah, for sure. The population of the small country of Suriname, less than 500,000 people, there is no majority ethnicity. People that live there now, most of them, or their forefathers, were brought there due to plantation economy, so people were brought over from Africa as slaves. Post-slavery, people were brought over from India and Indonesia. So those are the three main ethnic groups that are there. There's a fair amount of Chinese people as well now, maybe Lebanese. That's what I would usually be ascribed as far as an ethnicity, would be Lebanese, cause that was the closest thing to that. There are fewer than ten people that are Persian, so that wasn't really a thing. That's as far as where I'm from. As far as my religion - the Bahá'í faith, I grew up in the faith, but it was also not a major religion in Suriname. So, that was another thing I was figuring out. I really appreciate Suriname for a lot of things, but one of the things that I think should be a model for other places - they made the holy days of several different religions into national holidays. So, everyone has the day off on Hindu holy days, one of them I think is called Holi, over there we call it Phagwah, that's one of them. Diwali. Eid al-Fitr after Ramadan, which just occurred, that is a national holiday as well. Christmas and Easter, those are national holidays. Everyone has the day off and it's a teachable moment for kids. The teachers are talking about the celebratory day or day of remembrance, so it's not as foreign, if you will. It's not as different because you also get to participate in it by having the day off. I think it helps create a bit more familiarity and less ignorance, less fear from not knowing what things are. But Bahá'í holy days have yet to make it to the priority list, in terms of becoming a

national holiday. But it was very good to have holy days from three different religions.

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Aysha Moneer 08:00

Did those efforts result in an inclusive upbringing? Or did you still have experiences of marginalization because you were in a smaller community? How was that?

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Nabil Yazdani 08:22

I can think of times when I might have been disadvantaged. Most of the people in Suriname are darker skinned, so I kind of stood out. Standing out sometimes benefits you and sometimes it doesn't benefit you. I've experienced both. One thing that stood out to me was that - I wasn't born there. I got there when I was two and I would forever not be seen as Surinamese - but there was an Olympic swimmer from Suriname. He was actually from Trinidad. He was born in Trinidad, but then came to Suriname when he was maybe six or seven. He won Suriname's first Olympic medal and the country went bananas. We all did. It was fantastic and amazing. Everyone is like, "He's Surinamese." He's also a person of color. So, it's easier for them to embrace. You grow up, you have experiences and I can't say that I've always felt marginalized. I've always tried to fit in. In a way, maybe I don't think about a lot of things, that one kind of stood out to me. I'm sure that there's other situations where I have been advantaged as well, by being different or looking different. Maybe sometimes you stick out and so people notice you more and things like that. So, that can be good or bad.

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Aysha Moneer 10:19

You said earlier that you moved to go to school for undergrad at eighteen? How did you decide that you were going to leave South America for school? How was that decision and how did that come up?

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Nabil Yazdani 10:35

Well, there's only one university there. It's not a very highly regarded university, it's a decent university, but there are definitely better ones abroad. A lot of students from Suriname, if they have the means, end up moving abroad to study. A lot of times that's in Holland, because Dutch is spoken there. A lot of Surinamese have familiarity with the Netherlands, and sometimes may have family or friends there also. So, they'll move there and the language is the same, so it's easier to study there. I kind of felt more of a desire to come to the U.S. I happen to have family here who was supportive and helped to sponsor my application. So, that's how I decided to come here to the University of Texas. I have an uncle who lives in

College Station, and he was very much encouraging me to accept the offer from University of Texas. And I don't regret it at all. It was a good decision to come here. Austin's a really wonderful city and I've seen it grow. For a long time it hasn't wanted to acknowledge that it's growing. People like to think of it as a small town, but it's a city.

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Aysha Moneer 12:31

Austin was a lot less developed then, but were there elements of cultural shock when you moved as a student? Or had you had exposure because you had some family living here?

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Nabil Yazdani 12:46

I had visited the U.S before, but I hadn't been to Austin that I remembered. It was a culture shock. From a language perspective, I was okay. Dutch was my primary language, but English was a close second. I did feel sort of feel like everything was passing by me and no one took notice. Back home, when you're out and about everyone is turning their heads left and right, acknowledging people. It's a very friendly and acknowledging society. Here, what I noticed was everyone was looking straight ahead of them, and not really looking around, not looking to say hi to anyone, just going to their class or appointment or whatever. It felt a little bit odd and awkward, and a bit lonely at first. That was probably the the biggest thing that I had to get used to. The crazy thing is, by the time I was a senior at UT, it felt different. Maybe I'd gotten somewhat used to it, but I also felt like - maybe I was the one going around and acknowledging people, but I noticed it was friendlier or at least it seemed like that to me. So, it's a lot about perception, I guess.

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Aysha Moneer 14:33

During that time frame, I guess eighteen to twenty-two, tell me a bit about what that period was like leaving home for the first time, pretty far away. How was that overall?

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Nabil Yazdani 14:51

I was definitely homesick the first semester and was constantly thinking about home. I was pretty melancholy. I like listening to sad songs anyways, so I was just all in that mode. My parents would send me newspapers from back home in the mail. I would get these, and I would read them, and I would read them, and I would read them. At some point, as I kept reading about all the problems, I realized that the news would always report on some shooting that happened, some bad robbery that happened. I was like, "I'm just gonna turn to the back page." One day I was just like, "I can't read anything in the front, I'm just gonna turn

to the back page, which is the sports page. Oh, there's a story about my basketball team that I used to play on." The story was a fight broke out at the basketball game. So, I told my parents, "Please don't send me the newspaper anymore." Part of that was a conscious choice on my part, a growing understanding that I couldn't live in two places at the same time.

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Nabil Yazdani 16:22

If I bought my food, I would buy the cheapest thing I could, which was, for one dollar at the time you could buy fried rice from the street vendor or an Indian bread from the street vendor. That was all that I allowed myself to buy, if I had to buy food. I was trying to be very frugal. And every time I paid one dollar for that, I would do a currency conversion in my head. [I would think], "This is how much I'm paying, oh, my gosh, this is what someone in Suriname can do with this money." I couldn't keep that up. I couldn't keep that up. After several months, I was like, "I'm living here. I'm gonna have to just adjust to things here." For me, that was necessary to do, to just say, "I love things back home, and I will enjoy them when I'm back home for a visit. Otherwise, I need to do what I did when I was over there. I had to integrate here." So, that's what I did. Now I have to convert back to the metric system, which really bothers me from an intellectual perspective. It happened to units of measure, so now I think in gallons and have to go, "What is that in liters?" Miles to meters, it's like, "No, no." I think in miles per gallon for gas efficiency.

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Aysha Moneer 18:37

You were talking about that in school was when you were exposed to the Bahá'í community in Austin. I'm not sure what kind of your exposure you had to the faith growing up, but how did that part of your life change during this time?

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Nabil Yazdani 18:57

Yeah. So, I did grow up in the Bahá'í faith in Suriname as well and the community there was pretty active in doing things. One of the tenants of our faith is unity of mankind. Unity and diversity is actually celebrated. So there are a lot of people of different walks of life in our faith. Growing up, I was doing things as a child because my parents were involved and other grown ups in the community were like, "Hey, why don't you do this with us and that with us?" I was participating because others expected me to. Then when I got to high school age, things kicked into a different gear because I had a lot of schoolwork and was doing two different sports competitively. You get really busy and don't do as many things, you're still involved [in the faith], but not as much. When I turned eighteen and left home and I came here, it allowed me to reset and reframe things and figure out what I wanted to spend my time on, and it wasn't just whatever was in front of me and whatever people invited me to.

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Nabil Yazdani 20:04

I made contact with the Bahá'í club at the University of Texas and it was a very welcoming environment. I was amazed at how Americans are a lot more positive regardless of how skilled you are at something. I remember a meeting where someone tried to sing something and it wasn't a really good job, per se. But afterwards, several people were really enthusiastically going, "Hey, that was so great. So awesome." And I was thinking to myself, "That's interesting, because back home, we just be busting out laughing all of us," as friends, not to shame the person. But in effect, it wasn't an encouraging sort of thing, it was more about how can you rag on someone. That's what we would do. I was like, "This is different." I was very impressed by that. It took me a little bit to process like, "Huh, okay, this has some good qualities to it, to do it this way." Although I still like to make fun. I'm always up for a joke. But it was a very accepting environment. So, I did become a lot more active just because I wanted to be involved with this group and doing things and helping organize activities and setting out the table on the west mall, which is something that I don't know happens a lot anymore nowadays. It was a big thing back then. Just about a lot of organizations at their tables out at [west] mall. It was definitely a place to be. That's kind of how I started doing things related to the faith because I wanted to.

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Nabil Yazdani 22:59

I was still doing other things. I had to keep up my grades, so I was obviously studying. I played intramural sports. I had a part time job and still able to juggle things, but I did put priority on being involved with community life. And, the community was more at the university. There's the Austin Bahá'í community, of course, and we would go to the events I would sometimes get rides out there, or if I couldn't I would just catch the bus out to the Bahá'í center. It's not terribly far, but you did need to have some transportation out there. It was an important time in my life to figure out, "Okay, I was doing things in a certain mode and with a certain amount of commitment and ownership. Now I'm doing it on my own terms because I get to figure out what my priorities are."

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Aysha Moneer 24:25

It sounds like you started to get a lot of comfortability and enjoyment being student. Moving into graduation, you said you stayed in Austin for years. So did you stay in Austin after school? Did you move anywhere after that?

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Nabil Yazdani 24:42

Yeah. I was fortunate in being able to stay here in Austin. I actually walked around campus, maybe a year or two before graduating going, "I'm gonna miss this place," looking at the UT tower. I was lucky that I was able to get a job here in Austin. Before I started my last semester, I had actually gotten married. I met the person that I fell

head over heels in love with, and we decided to get married. She was not from Texas, she was living in Florida at the time. Then she moved down here, then we were both students. I still had one semester left, she had several more to go. Part of me trying to find a job here in Austin was also so that she could continue with school as well.

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Nabil Yazdani 25:54

Austin was definitely a good place to stay. We had intended to move elsewhere, after we were both done with schooling. We'd both grown up in other countries and were thinking, "Maybe we'll go and live somewhere else." The idea of giving back was a strong driver for us as well, because we both had gotten pretty good educations in the countries we grew up in. One of the things that happens is, especially in smaller countries, is this concept of brain drain. A lot of people will go and study abroad and then they don't come back. I contributed to that, but I didn't intend to. That was actually one of the things we wanted to do. We didn't end up [living abroad] because of other curve balls in life. But that was something that we had wanted to do. We were trying not to put down roots here but both our kids are here and were born in Austin. That's a bit about how I ended up staying here.

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Aysha Moneer 27:21

A lot has changed in Austin over the past ten years. How do you reflect on your time in Austin and the changes that have happened in the city?

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Nabil Yazdani 27:37

One of the things that I really appreciated about Austin - in the 90s when I first got here, and I think it still holds true today - you could have just about any interest or hobby and you could find like-minded people who would do whatever it is that you're into. There was enough diversity of interests, activity. If you were an outdoorsy person, if you were a computer nerd, if you wanted to go spelunking, you could find people who wanted to go and do that with you. So, I was always amazed at how many things you could do. There's a lot of really great hiking trails here, there's some pretty good swimming, there's some pretty good fishing. So, you could choose your hobby and adventure and find people that also enjoy it.

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Nabil Yazdani 29:01

The other thing is that there's the fact that [Austin] had a lot of technology, hi-tech tendencies or opportunities was also very good. I studied engineering, and right now I work for a company that manufactures microchips. That's something that I think helps move things forward in a significant way. Austin is not just about manufacturing, it's about programming and

software sort of galore. So, there's a lot of technology here. Having the seat of government here is interesting as well. People in Austin are very passionate about things. One thing that I've seen be consistently true is that people want to do well for others, not just themselves. They are community minded. People try to improve things related to their environment, but also social justice.

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Nabil Yazdani 30:43

Not to say that there aren't problems here, there are definitely problems here. But people are not afraid of having the conversations and trying to figure out how to do things differently. That is something I do appreciate. You layer that on top of what I call American South culture. That does tend to have some things that are like, "Well, this is the way it's always been done." I walked around the forty acres wondering about why there were these statues of Confederate leaders on campus, going, "Wasn't this the side that lost and was trying to keep this whole system of slavery around?" Part of me wanting to try and integrate was listening and observing. I may have opinions, but I try not to have them be strong opinions because I want to see what people say about it and be influenced by it. But that never quite really made sense. They talk about states' rights. That's what it's about. It's like, "Interesting, okay." It kind of seems like there's tortured arguments around that. Now, twenty-five years later - at least for me, twenty-five years - I'm noticing that there's national conversations with people going, "Yeah, why is that?" So, there's things like that. It's sort of like, I guess a family that has problems, that's what it is. And then you might think about it longer and go, "Well it's not supposed to be like that."

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Aysha Moneer 33:08

And of course when you join the family, you realize the problems shouldn't be normalized, and that's when you're like, "Oh." That's interesting to hear that, especially as an immigrant as well, you were also just adjusting to understanding the underlying dynamics of the country's history. But what I thought was interesting was something you mentioned before, in terms of thinking about where to live, and giving back and having unity wherever you are. Can you speak a bit about the Bahá'í doctrines that more explicitly talk about social justice? That's not something that is necessarily very explicitly included in many religions, so I'd like to kind of hear your perspective on that.

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Nabil Yazdani 34:15

One of the quotes in our writing - God speaking and saying, "the best beloved of all things in my sight is justice." It goes on to say that it's attained by seeing things through one's own eyes. I'm paraphrasing this part now, but seeing things through one's own eyes, not through the eyes of their neighbors. Sometimes we will have to form our own opinions.

Thinking about what is right and what is wrong, sometimes you tend to normalize - you're like, "Well, this is what everyone's doing." Well, it doesn't mean that it's right. You have this one drive to try and integrate and then you have this other one with moral compass, right. For example, this is just on a personal note, but drinking, I'm not allowed to drink alcohol as a Bahá'í. There are so many opportunities that have come around from high school in Suriname to college - with people saying, "You don't know what you're missing." I was like, "I kind of don't, but you know, I'm okay with that." I'll still go and hang out with my friends that are choosing to drink. And I told them, that's not what I do, but I'll still have fun not being under the influence. So, I want to integrate, but I still have to keep my own standards of what I believe is right.

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Nabil Yazdani 36:42

Another principle in our faith is to work toward eventually having a society where we have eliminated the extremes of wealth and poverty. Not to say that there shouldn't be difference in what people have because work has to be rewarded, and whatnot. But the extremes of both are really bad for society. This is now my take on that, but you have to be able to raise all the boats, right? We're looking at research nowadays that looks over decades, and we're seeing how at some point in the 70s, things diverged. Where everyone was rising at small rates, that just became this really crazy upward swing for the folks that had the most. Their rate of growth just went bonkers. Most people did not have that. You look at it over a longer period of time and whole world really has been doing better over time, more people have come out of poverty. That's true and that's a good thing, but could we have done more and better? And I think the answer is yes. Because we have now situations where there are people with ridiculous amounts of money and it doesn't help the world in general to have that type of imbalance.

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Nabil Yazdani 39:08

As a teaching of our faith, that's not a good thing, there's also a lot of emphasis on thinking about and doing things for those who have less. The example in our faith, that we as Bahá'ís are supposed to follow is the person who was the head of the of the faith in the early part of the 20th century. From 1892 until 1921, this person was known as 'Abdu'l-Bahá, which is an Arabic name for "servant of the glory." He was the son of the prophet, founder of the faith. After the passing of Bahá'u'lláh, who was the prophet founder of our faith, [the son] was appointed as the head of the faith. He was not a messenger of God, his father was, he was the head of the faith. He was the person we were supposed to turn to, and who was authorized to interpret. He also lived the life of a Bahá'í. So, there's a distinction - there's the manifestation of God, they live in a human form, but they're really endowed by the Holy Spirit, whereas, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was a human being who was following these teachings. The

life that he lived is one that we are supposed to look at as inspiration from and to try and emulate.

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Nabil Yazdani 41:16

He thought of the poor all the time. He would do things small and large. Everyday, he would go around and hand food to people. In our faith, we're not supposed to give to beggars. Begging is forbidden. But you look at the life of 'Abdu'l-Bahá - and people call him "the master," even though his name means "the servant," people like to refer to him as the master - he would go around and give people food, give people money, help people who were sick, arrange things for people, ask Bahá'ís to go and help this person or that person. It didn't matter what religion they were, didn't matter what status they were, they could be the poorest of person. Sometimes it could be somebody who had been really bad to them to the Bahá'ís, but he fell ill, and ['Abdu'l-Bahá] still would ask the Bahá'ís to go and take care of this person. Somebody who would spit in their face when he was well, 'Abdu'l-Bahá would still go and help take care of this person. That was the life of service he lived.

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Nabil Yazdani 42:37

For me personally, I've had to think about this. In our most holy book, it says, "Do not give to beggars," and then the life of service that someone has - made me think about this, we're supposed to help people, you're supposed to catch them before they get to the point of having to beg. You're supposed to help people who have less and not allow them to get to this point of desperation. So, it doesn't mean don't give to people. It means preemptively help people out. That's something that has a lot of meaning for me.

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Aysha Moneer 43:36

Yeah, thank you for sharing that. That's really interesting. Now, you are one of nine members of a Spiritual Assembly of a Bahá'í temple in Austin. Tell me a bit about that - how that started and where you are now?

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Nabil Yazdani 43:57

In our faith, if a locality has nine or more Bahá'í adults, they will form what is called a Spiritual Assembly, a local Spiritual Assembly. That is done through an election process that happens every year in late April. Bahá'í elections are quite different in that there is no campaigning. There is no nominating. There's no talking about who you want to vote for, who you don't want to vote for - to the point where people in the community are worried about excessively praising anybody right before an election because they don't want to

come across as electioneering. It's a private matter. You do it through your secret ballot and you don't talk about who you vote for, but you're supposed to do it by taking some time to reflect on it meditate and then choose people that you think have the qualities to serve people. The people who get elected, every one of them doesn't feel worthy to do this service, but we're told we have to do it if your community elects you. You don't have to, you can decline, but you're really encouraged to take it on, even if you don't feel like you have these qualities - who does really? We're just a group of people who are striving to live a certain way, and nobody's really gotten there.

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Nabil Yazdani 46:11

I was first elected to the Spiritual Assembly here in Austin in 2010. I have served continuously since then, as one of the nine members of the Spiritual Assembly. I don't have any say over anything particularly. I don't have any authority as a single person over things in the in the faith or the administration, but I serve on the Assembly, and I serve the Assembly. The focus is on the institution. When the nine members meet and a decision is made, that's the decision that everyone follows. We have this process of consultation, that we do, where you're supposed to let go of your idea. You offer your idea and then others may offer their ideas, or they may take your idea and pick it apart. And that's fine, because you should put it there in the middle of the conversation and not be attached to it, and see what happens to it.

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Nabil Yazdani 47:31

If the process is done well, it makes something better out of something that may not have started out as good. The goal is for there to be consensus in the meeting about how to move forward. If there's not a consensus, then you take a vote and the majority opinion will carry and become the decision of the Assembly, which all members of the assembly and community are supposed to carry out. I might think, "Oh, this was not the right thing to do," and I still have to wholeheartedly support it because that's what the Assembly decided to do. We have to trust that that is the right thing to do at that point in time. It may not be. In our writings, it says [even when something] may not be be the correct thing to do, if we do it in unity, we will figure out that we need to make a course correction. But moving forward in unity is important.

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Aysha Moneer 48:53

I really like that. If you don't figure it out the first time in unity, then you fix it, again, in unity. That's awesome. So, do you serve as a facilitator of those conversations? How does that work?

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Nabil Yazdani 49:14

I have served a few different roles over the years. I have been the treasurer. The past couple of years, I have been the Vice Chair for the Assembly. Sometimes when the chair is not able to be at the meeting, I'll chair the meetings, trying to bring about and facilitate the consultation process. We do something similar at our community-wide feasts. We have them once a month. Bahá'í months are nineteen days long, and there are nineteen months throughout the year. We come together at the beginning of every month as a community - sometimes all of Austin, sometimes we break out into five smaller groups and have smaller feasts. But this feast is something that Bahá'ís around the world observe. The chair of the Spiritual Assembly is usually chairing that consultation. There's three parts to it. There's a social aspect, a spiritual, devotional part, and there's an administrative part. That's where the Chair will usually invite consultation and the whole community and see what things they might want to recommend to the Assembly or ideas the community has. The few times I have chaired these consultations has made me have a lot of admiration for the people who chair it on a regular basis because you have to be very tuned in and present to what's going on, and how to bring things to a consensus. Maybe we can't agree on this, but maybe there's a smaller part that we can agree on, and let's get that part out of the way and see what we do with the rest. Maybe the rest gets kicked down the road for another time. Maybe some of it has to just be done by a majority vote. It's not the first option you go with, but eventually you might have to do that.

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Nabil Yazdani 52:13

I did start my service on the Assembly as the treasurer. The way things work in our community, is that only Bahá'ís are allowed to donate to the Bahá'í fund. Not only do we not go soliciting from anyone, but we don't accept it if someone comes and offers money to contribute to the Bahá'í fund. We tell them, "If you really want to give, you can consider declaring yourself a Bahá'í [laughs], then we can take your money [laughs]." That's one of the principles of our faith, that only Bahá'ís are able to give towards things that are specifically for the faith. We may have some other endeavors that are not specifically for the Bahá'í faith and people can contribute towards those. So, there's that. When I started serving on the Assembly, I was elected treasurer. I don't have training in accounting or anything like that, but I am an engineer who likes to do Excel. So I put those skills to work. I did that for about six years. Now there's another person who is the treasurer, and I support him in his service.

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Nabil Yazdani 53:58

I had to learn like QuickBooks and things like that. The other thing is that people's contributions are private and confidential. So, the treasurer never comes up and says, "Oh, so-and-so did such a wonderful thing by contributing this." We don't talk about those things. That's just between you and God, as far as what you feel you want to give. There's also no public passing around of anything. There's no public pressure for people to

contribute anything. The treasurer usually tries to find a corner of the room to set the fund box and people can go and give there. It's not in front of the room or on display, or anything like that. Nowadays, with the ability to give online, that's an even more private way for people to give. This past year, as we had to all go virtual, it's been pretty amazing to see - our Assembly was preparing for a lot of requests from what we call our Compassion Fund - where community members may have needs, sometimes they're not even community members, they may just be a friend of somebody who might need something. There was this sense of, "Well, we may not get as much money because people may be out of work, and we won't have in-person feasts where people can drop their checks or cash in a fund box. We may not get as much money coming in, and we may have a lot more requests. So, we closed the Bahá'í center - we still own the Bahá'í center - but we shut off the utilities that we could and services that were needed because the center wasn't being used. We were trying to save money for those kinds of eventualities.

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Nabil Yazdani 56:21

We didn't get a whole lot of requests, and contributions kept coming in. So, that was very admirable. And people had already started going online and making contributions, either through their banks with online bill pay or other things like that. There is also a website that our National Assembly has that people can go to and contribute toward that way. So, it's been an interesting year for our community because we haven't been able to lay eyes on each other in person. People love to hug and we haven't been able to do that. People love to feed one another by hosting a feast or a holy day or an event or a Sunday morning fireside. We always like to put refreshments out and socialize. And there's a lot of pent up demand for that. People are going to be very, very appreciative when we are able to open things back up again. Of course, with the latest from the CDC, the assembly will have to take that up. The assembly has tried to follow whatever the guidance has been from local, state, and national health agencies. At the start of the pandemic, it decided that it would follow whichever guideline was the most cautious of the three. Sometimes there hasn't been agreement between what the federal says versus state. We don't get into it, we just go with whichever is the most cautious, we'll follow that, and that's what we've been. We've been doing that up to this point. Now, it seems that the assembly would probably want to review that.

A

Aysha Moneer 58:49

Were you opened partially this year or were you doing everything virtually. How did some services change?

N

Nabil Yazdani 58:59

Our center has not opened for any events, but there have been two exceptions. One was a

food delivery project that one of our community members started last summer. She was doing it on a weekly basis. She had worked with an organization called Communities of Color United and the housing authority of the city of Austin. They had a list of people who had mobility issues or for whom it was not safe to go out. She had worked with this list of people, maybe fifteen to twenty people. Over time it grew and she was getting more volunteers, not just from the Bahá'í community, but from other connections and people that want to help as well. So, it's become a monthly thing now, and the center allowed that to happen. Once a month, people will come to the center for food distribution. People bring food that weekend and everything gets figured out. On Sunday, all the deliveries go out. Close to the Bahá'í center, but there are people that live outside of town as well. I know of people in Kyle and even Red Rock, TX that are being served. So, that's one thing the Bahá'í center is used for.

N

Nabil Yazdani 1:00:06

The other thing that it was used for, for one day, was for the tellers to help figure out the election of our local Spiritual Assembly just a few weeks ago. That was done in-person at the Bahá'í center. Restrictions already had been somewhat lifted, and the people volunteering were vaccinated. So, those have been the only in-person events. But the Bahá'í community doesn't just do things at the center. There are a lot of neighborhood activities that are done. Pre-pandemic, there were children's classes, not just at the Bahá'í Center but also in peoples' homes for their neighbors and friends, and invite people to do things. So, classes for children, spiritual education for children, but also for middle schoolers, which we call junior youth - our faith sees a lot of potential in that age. Society kind of ascribes to them as being in a troubled time, when there's a lot of things happening in adolescence. The institutions of our faith keep reminding us that this is when people are the most idealistic and want to change the world, and trying to figure out what their place is in bringing about those changes. How is it that they want to contribute? Just like in the education system, there are teachers who love teaching middle school, and there are teachers who will not touch them with a ten foot pole. There are people who are what we call, "animators" for the junior youth. A lot of those people will be younger adults or older youth, and these junior youth will look up to them.

N

Nabil Yazdani 1:03:02

I've been involved in Boy Scouts since I was a kid and now my son is in Boy Scouts. The Boy Scouts have a model like that as well where the older youth are teaching the younger ones and have this kind of system going as well. So, that's another thing we do in neighborhoods. We have devotional gatherings that people are supposed to have in their homes and invite their family, their neighbors, have devotionals with their family members. But also, make your circle bigger. That's what we were always trying to do is like, "Who do we feel like is in the inner circle? And how do we widen that embrace?" Bahá'ís around the world are trying to figure that out. There's places in the

world where this has been taken to amazing levels, where there's thousands of activities happening on a neighborhood level. All around the world our communities are trying to figure out, "How do we build a community. Not just a Bahá'í community - our focus has shifted from being insular to a wider community." Like Austin, not Bahá'ís of Austin, but Austin. How do we expand our horizon of where we're looking to include people?

N

Nabil Yazdani 1:04:48

I'll say one more thing about looking to the example of the master 'Abdu'l-Bahá. He was actually knighted by the British government back in the early 1900s because he had been setting up for years, creating sort this system of storing grains and foods and things like that and helping set up an aqueduct system. He had been a prisoner and an exile his whole life until, I want to say 1908, I can't exactly remember the year when the Turkish revolution happened. But under the Ottoman Empire, they were prisoners there. But he had a lot of free rein to do things because he was sort of under house arrest. He was doing things and helping set up a water and storage system. There was a famine that happened. And because of the fact that he had all those things set up and was able to help the wider society, the British Crown decided to knight him.

N

Nabil Yazdani 1:06:23

He was not a British subject, and I forget how exactly the knighting process works for people who are not subjects, but it is possible to do that. So thinking of not just our little community - it is important to think of our community and support it - but we also have to have an eye towards everyone. There are people who are working with Bahá'ís to carry forward concepts that our faith teaches, [like] unity and having a more spiritual society, improving both the material and spiritual health of our communities. So, if people want to be animators of junior youth, they don't have to be a Bahá'í to do it. There's a lot of people who are not Bahá'í who are animating, and the people that are being animated, the junior youth, and not necessarily Bahá'ís either. But it's something that we feel we can contribute to our communities and make our communities better.

A

Aysha Moneer 1:07:48

That's great. To be mindful of your time, I'll end this interview by opening up this space to let you either go back to anything you want, anything we might have skipped over, or just anything you might want to say. You can take a minute to think about it as well.

N

Nabil Yazdani 1:08:14

Okay, yeah. So, I guess I'm thinking about it in the context of religions in Texas, which is sort of the overarching theme of the collection. I don't know that I mentioned this, but you

know [Bahá'ís] are about unity, but we also accept the validity of other religions and their messengers, manifestations, and prophets because we believe that this is the long game. We believe that God is teaching us, humanity, how to live, how to become better, how to build this kingdom of God on Earth. So, we are in need of continual guidance. Every age has a messenger and so we actually read other faith's holy writings and also our own. For us, it comes from the perspective that these are the words that God wanted us to know at some point in time. Some of it will always be applicable, if they're spiritual teachings, and some of it may be temporal. There may be talks about how to organize one's society and what to eat, what not to eat, how to marry, how to have this particular event, and things like that. And those things should change over time when there's not necessarily a principle there that has to be held. Things change and the medicine for each particular time may be different depending on what ails society.

N

Nabil Yazdani 1:11:07

For example, over time, greater unity is happening, unity of a town or a city or love thy neighbor - Christianity brought that very, very strongly. Islam helped bring the concept of nationhood, uniting warring tribes to act as a nation, that was not a concept that had been around before. Bahá'ís believe now is the time for world unity. They think of the world as one country type of thing. There is a lot of respect for all the religions. We believe that Bahá'u'lláh has the current message, but he's not the last. So, we try to be involved with other endeavors. For example, there's an organization called iACT, which is Interfaith Action of Central Texas. Bahá'ís participate in that, as do many other wonderful faith communities. There's things that we can learn from each other and have a lot of unity with and those are really wonderful times that I've experienced other religions here in Texas, in Austin. So that's what I want to end with.

A

Aysha Moneer 1:12:54

That's great. That's great. Thank you so much. I'll go ahead and stop the recording.