

# Hollywood, Homelessness and Hope

DAVID LANGNESS



For more than thirty years, I lived in Southern California, in and around Hollywood.

In the early part of that three-decade period, probably because of my own youth and immaturity, I had the typical wide-eyed, awestruck reaction many people have when they encounter fame and celebrity.

But then I gradually got to know a few well-known people—directors, writers, comedians, actors and musicians, all “slebs” in the standard Hollywood parlance—and my world changed dramatically. How did that happen? Well, therein lies an instructive tale.

First of all, I didn’t set out to meet any stars. When you live in L.A., you soon learn that sleb-stalking just isn’t cool—if you see someone recognizable, you’re supposed to ignore them in a blasé sort of way, lest you be thought of as a tourist or a rube or an autograph hound. Horrors!

Instead, I took a completely different direction. I made a decision, after reading the Baha’i writings and trying to incorporate them into my life, that I needed to find ways to serve humanity.

I have to thank Abdu’l-Baha, the son of Baha’u’llah, the founder of the Baha’i Faith, for setting me on that path. His life, which he dedicated to the service of humanity, exemplifies what it means to be a Baha’i. I believe in the principles of the Baha’i Faith—the oneness of humanity, the essential unity of all religions, the importance of working for world peace—but I realized when I moved to Hollywood, where image is so important, that my beliefs and my actions weren’t always in sync. So I decided that I had to find ways to help the poor and the oppressed, just as Abdu’l-Baha recommended.

More than anything else, this passage from one of Abdu'l-Baha's talks motivated me:

**Without action nothing in the material world can be accomplished, neither can words unaided advance a man in the spiritual Kingdom. It is not through lip-service only that the elect of God have attained to holiness, but by patient lives of active service they have brought light into the world.**

**Therefore strive that your actions day by day may be beautiful prayers. Turn towards God, and seek always to do that which is right and noble. Enrich the poor, raise the fallen, comfort the sorrowful, bring healing to the sick, reassure the fearful, rescue the oppressed, bring hope to the hopeless, shelter the destitute!**

**This is the work of a true Baha'i, and this is what is expected of him. If we strive to do all this, then are we true Baha'is, but if we neglect it, we are not followers of the Light, and we have no right to the name. God, who sees all hearts, knows how far our lives are the fulfilment of our words. – Abdu'l-Baha, *Paris Talks*, pp. 80-81.**

The Baha'i writings say that deeds, not words, should characterize our lives, and I knew I had a long way to go before I reached that “patient lives of active service” state of being.

At the time I worked as a media advocate for health care for the poor. My job involved talking to reporters every day about the barriers in our society, both economic and environmental, that kept sick people from getting care. My work meant that I went to lots of meetings, participated in public panels, gave speeches and wrote position papers and press releases. It meant, too, that the media—newspaper, magazine, radio and television reporters—interviewed me just about every day.

My job gave me a sense of satisfaction that I was doing something for humanity, but still I longed to have the one-on-one interaction and the actual service I felt the Baha'i teachings calling me towards. When I went home at night from my office, I felt like I hadn't really taken part in the actual lives of the people I was trying to help. Working at the policy level, I missed the authentic human contact that makes service to others such a gratifying activity.

So I did some research, talked to several people and decided to see if I could devote my spare time to volunteer work for a charity or two. I quickly learned that every city and town has a wide range of choices when it comes to charitable work—in any society, in just about every place where people live, no matter what you do, you can find those who need your help. I hoped to get involved in some local work right in Los Angeles; but I also yearned to extend my efforts internationally in some way, too.



I wound up, after evaluating the opportunities, volunteering to help start a grassroots health care organization for homeless people on Skid Row in downtown L.A., and also working with a small charity called Medical Aid for El Salvador, which provided artificial limbs to wartime landmine victims in Central America. I figured, with my health care background, that I might be able to help.

I didn't know it at the time, but both of those decisions would put me squarely in the glare of Hollywood celebrity, and would teach me what true fame truly meant.