



Dr. Magdalene M. Carney

From the Editor's Desk

JOHN S. HATCHER

THE AMAZING NASHVILLE BAHÁ'Í COMMUNITY IN THE 1960S

I declared myself a Bahá'í on the 31st of December 1959 while I was home in Atlanta on spring break from Vanderbilt University. Weeks later, I found myself one night standing before the impressive array of individuals who constituted the Local Spiritual Assembly of Nashville, Tennessee. There was my brother—William S. Hatcher, five years my senior—who had responded to everything I could think to ask about the Bahá'í Faith and who had declared in June 1957. I had come up for his graduation and met some of the interesting people who would later become an important part of my life. Bill, of course, later went on to write books on the Faith and serve on the National Spiritual Assemblies of Switzerland, Canada, and Russia.

There was Dr. Sarah Pereira (later a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and then an Auxiliary Board member); Erma Hayden, a concert pianist later to serve on the National Teaching Committee of the United States; and her husband, Robert Hayden, a professor and poet (later to become a member of the University of Michigan faculty and the first African American to be poet

laureate of the United States). There were Casey and Alice Walton, Georgia Miller, Winston Evans, and Mary Watkins, editor at the Methodist Publishing House. All of their amazing stories are much too lengthy and noteworthy to detail here.

At the time, I was merely a sophomore at Vanderbilt, having studied the Faith intensely for two years, a bit nervous, but also keen to respond to the queries that—in my mind—would enable the Local Spiritual Assembly to determine if I was sufficiently worthy and informed to become a member of the community led by this stellar group of notables—educators, editors, poets, musicians, mathematicians.

Suffice it to say that I “passed,” was joyfully accepted into their midst, and spent the next three years getting to know and love them, and, most important of all, establishing in my heart and mind what a Bahá'í community should be, how it should feel, and how it should conduct its affairs.

That foundation has stood me in good stead for sixty years, and I happily utilize this opportunity as editor of the *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* to present brief life sketches of two individuals from that community in our continuing attempt to celebrate those African-American Bahá'ís whose lives, works, and reputations represent some of the fruitful results stemming from the longtime emphasis on racial equality in the American Bahá'í community, a legacy begun most prominently by Hand of the Cause of God Louis Gregory, and carried on to this

day by a multitude of dedicated souls who have rendered such amazing service to the Bahá'í Faith and to society at large.

In this issue, we will briefly recount the life stories of Dr. Robert Hayden—who, as I mentioned, was a member of the Local Assembly when I declared my faith in Bahá'u'lláh—and Dr. Magdalene Carney, who joined that same community in 1962, having been taught the Faith by Sarah Pereira, then Professor of Romance Languages at Tennessee State University.

DR. ROBERT E. HAYDEN (1913–1980)

It is with no small amount of irony that we might characterize Hayden as either “Bahá'í poet” or “African-American poet”—indeed, as the first African-American poet laureate of the United States—before we first classify him simply as a poet, since he disliked the idea of being a “hyphenated” poet. He received no small amount of criticism for not allowing himself to be classified by some narrower identity. “I object to strict definitions of what a poet is or should be,” he maintained. “We're living in a time when individuality is threatened by a kind of mechanizing anonymity, and by regimentation” (quoted in Hatcher, *From the Auroral Darkness* 74).

The fact is, however, that by the end of his all-too-brief life, he had become celebrated by both the African American community and by the Bahá'í community for his outstanding capacity as an artist, unrelenting courage as a man,

and steadfast devotion to his beliefs as a Bahá'í. Among his most widely acclaimed poems alluding to the historical plight of African Americans are “Middle Passage”—a poetic rendering of the *Amistad* affair—his paean sonnet “Frederick Douglass,” and “Runagate Runagate,” a tribute to Harriet Tubman. Likewise, his poems “The Prophet,” “Bahá'u'lláh in the Garden of Ridván,” and “The Dawnbreaker” are possibly the best poems about the Faith that have yet been penned.

Raised in the Detroit ghetto (ironically known as “Paradise Valley”), Hayden was from his youth entranced by language, poetry, and the concepts of justice, freedom, and identity. After working with other major writers as part of the Federal Writers' Project in 1938, he married concert pianist and composer Erma Inez Morris in 1940, and the next year he enrolled at the University of Michigan, where he studied under heralded English poet W. H. Auden.

It was during this time that both Robert and Erma became acquainted with the Bahá'í Faith, becoming members prior to moving in 1946 to Nashville, where Hayden taught English literature at Fisk University. As part of the growing Nashville Bahá'í community, both Robert and Erma were active in Bahá'í activities. Hayden concentrated on his heavy teaching load and on writing poetry whenever he could, and Erma assumed the position of supervisor of music for Nashville public schools.

Rejecting the tension imposed on him by the rising pressure among

African-American writers and artists to focus his poetic gifts on becoming politically active, Hayden was widely criticized for rejecting what he considered the constricting label of “Black poet.” But around this same time, in 1966, he achieved global acclaim by winning the Grand Prize for Poetry at the first World Festival of Negro Arts held in Dakar, Senegal, for his collection of verse *Ballad of Remembrance*.

From this point forward, his career ascended. He published a succession of well-received volumes of verse, and in 1967 he recorded his poems for the Library of Congress and was appointed poetry editor of the Bahá'í magazine *World Order*. That summer, he was appointed poet-in-residence at Indiana State University, and in 1968, visiting professor of English at the University of Michigan. In 1969, he served as the Bigham Professor at the University of Louisville, and that summer as visiting poet at the University of Washington. In 1975, Hayden received the Academy of American Poets Fellowship, and he topped off the decade by being offered a professorship at the University of Michigan, shortly after which he was first offered the position of poet laureate, a position he accepted in 1977 and for which he was reappointed in 1978. In the meantime, he was also awarded honorary doctorates at Brown University in 1976 and at Fisk in 1978.

It was during the last year of his tenure as poet laureate in Washington, D.C., that Hayden began to feel ill. Upon his return to Ann Arbor, Michigan, he discovered he had contracted

cancer. In February of 1980 he died, but not before the department of African-American Studies at the University of Michigan paid tribute to the contribution he had made to the field, an honor he treasured above all others because it helped vindicate the difficult stand he had taken in the 1960s and afterward by refusing to make his poems polemical or to cater to the demands of what he called “the minotaurs of edict,”¹ the “monsters of abstraction” that “police and threaten us.”²

There is much more one could say about his life and his art, something that a number of fine scholars are currently undertaking. My own work *From the Auroral Darkness* (George Ronald 1984) has recently been succeeded by Derik Smith, Associate Professor of English at Claremont McKenna College, who in 2018 published *Robert Hayden in Verse* with the prestigious University of Michigan Press, a highly praised book that won the 2019 College Language Association Book Award.

Hayden's poetry continues to be studied and anthologized, especially in college texts. For example, “Those Winter Sundays,” his touching and memorable tribute to the love his foster father bestowed on him, is one of the most anthologized poems of the twentieth century.

1 From Hayden's “Ballad of Remembrance” in *A Ballad of Remembrance*.

2 From Hayden's “In the Mourning Time” in *Words in the Mourning Time*.

Finally, as I note in my own study of his life and art, his wife Erma was seen by the Bahá'í community as intimately involved in the Faith on the local and national level, while Hayden seemed isolated, laboring at home in his austere profession as poet. And yet, as I also point out, he has doubtless attracted more people to study the Bahá'í Faith than he would have had he dedicated his days to the usual activities meant to teach the Faith, rather than laboring away at searching out precisely the best, the most exact words to fashion the verses he left behind.

DR. MAGDALENE M. CARNEY
(1929–1991)

Like Robert Hayden, Magdalene Carney rose from a most unlikely beginning to bloom like a sunflower emerging tall and bright in an untended field. I met her when she first became a Bahá'í, in the Nashville community in 1962, after having been introduced to the Faith by Dr. Sarah Pereira. Upon being given a pamphlet about the Bahá'í teachings, she knew immediately she had discovered the path by which she could channel her plentiful talents and achieve her lifelong objectives as an educator and a dedicated servant to humankind.

My immediate impression of her—shared by so many who met her—was that this was one of the most authentic human beings I would ever encounter. She was a loving person, a light in the darkness, neither shy nor restrained. One sensed that she knew exactly what she was doing and that by emulating

her, one would always be on the right track, whatever the task at hand. In short, she was her own person, sure of herself, but never prideful or remote or disdainful of anyone who came to her for assistance.

The eldest of eight children, “Mag” (as she liked to be called) grew up on a farm where she labored and where she was expected by her parents to set an example for her brothers and sisters. And early on she knew that the most important manner in which she could excel at this task, help her parents emerge from dire poverty, and possibly pursue other objectives they had instilled in her, was to pursue education as far as it would take her.

Because she was descended from slaves who had no such opportunity, she viewed education not only as a means by which she could make a difference, but as a mandate whereby she could serve her family and—as her life proceeded apace—humankind as a whole, focusing particularly on disenfranchised African American women.

So it was that she excelled in her studies, graduating magna cum laude from Tennessee State University in Nashville, then receiving her MA degree from the highly regarded George Peabody College in Nashville, majoring in English and Education.

She remained in Nashville for the next fifteen years (1967–1982), teaching in the public schools and supervising student teachers. And it was during this era of the Civil Rights Movement that Mag was awarded a Ford Foundation Fellowship in Educational

Leadership for her work leading and organizing a nonviolent desegregation of the public school system in Canton, Mississippi. Using the funds she received from this award, she went to the University of Massachusetts, where she earned her doctorate in education.

Firm in a conviction she already had, but that was confirmed and enhanced by her study of the Bahá'í Writings, Carney believed that racial prejudice, indeed prejudice of any kind, was an emotional commitment to a false understanding of reality. Consequently, she taught that preventing or treating prejudice could only be accomplished by first gaining access to both the minds and hearts of others and then re-educating both.

Because the motive force and bulwark in all these accomplishments was her in-depth understanding of and unstinting devotion to the Bahá'í Faith, she was a stalwart and effective Bahá'í teacher. Her charisma and the magnetism of her remarkable smile and even more remarkable character were irresistible.

In 1970, she was elected to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, and she was re-elected successively for the following thirteen years, until she was appointed to serve at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel, as a Counsellor with the International Teaching Centre. From this time on, until her death in Haifa in 1991, she traveled to Africa, Europe, and various island nations where she imbued the members of every community she touched with the

desire to excel in every aspect of their lives, encouraging the spiritual, moral, social, and intellectual development of growing Bahá'í communities. She participated in the United Nations World Conference on Women in Kenya in 1985 and gave a keynote speech for the European Bahá'í Women's Conference in the Netherlands in 1989, two years before her passing.

As one of the many tributes to her spirit and legacy, the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States established the Magdalene Carney Bahá'í Institute in West Palm Beach, Florida, which today is utilized as a teaching center for courses on the Bahá'í Faith and as a training center.

My most lasting personal memory of Mag will always be a conversation I had with her at a Bahá'í summer school in Florida. I had for a long while stewed over a dilemma resulting from a major decision I had to make regarding my life and career. I presented her as honestly as I knew how the pros and cons of the two options I had, as well as the consternation and turmoil that having to make a decision was causing me. Her response was as helpful as it was timely and terse: "Just choose one and do it!" she said firmly. It was exactly what I needed to hear.



Dr. Robert E. Hayden