

# VOICE WITHIN A VOICE

The writings of Kahlil Gibran

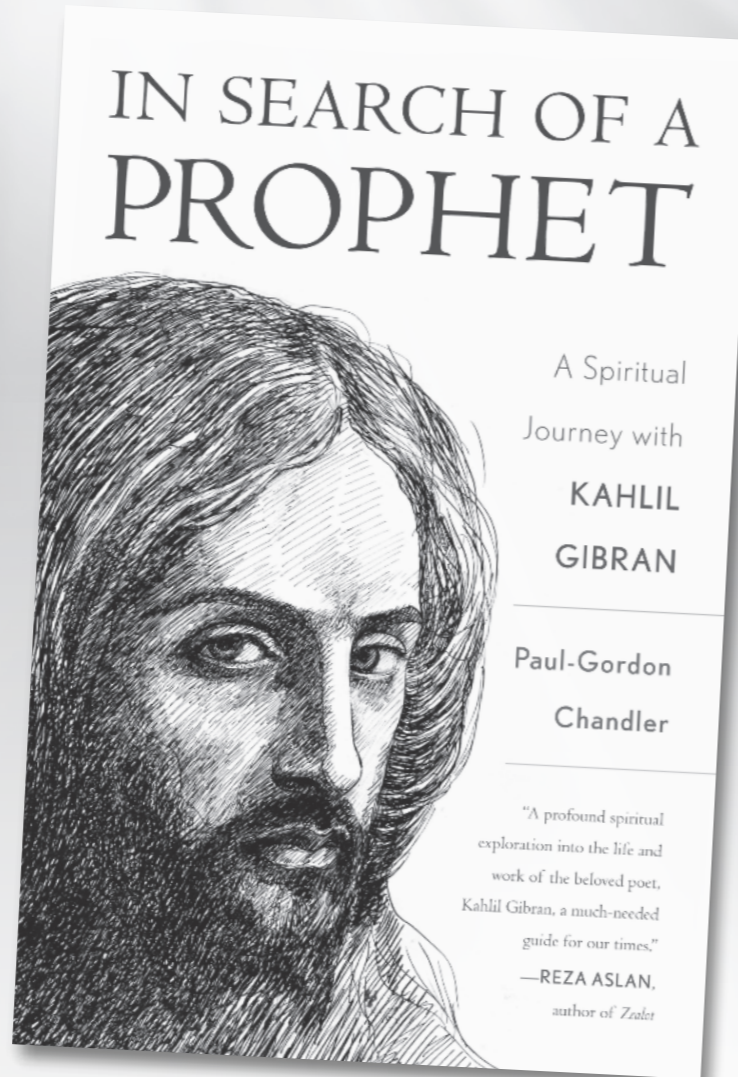
It is almost impossible to confront many of the world's challenges today without addressing religion or spirituality. More than ever before, voices are needed that call for unity and respect, and that inspire us to live deeply and generously in our thinking and actions toward the "other." I believe Kahlil Gibran is just that voice, offering much needed wisdom and guidance, an unparalleled spiritual guide for our times. His life and work touch on critical issues of today: bridging between creeds and cultures of the Middle East and West, care for the environment, gender equality, interest in spirituality rather than religion, and the importance of learning from the best in each faith tradition.

My own passion for Gibran came from living and working in the Middle East. I was intrigued by how enthusiastically he is admired both throughout the Middle East and in much of the West. I began to explore his journey of spiritual development and sought to discover what could cause a person, born into what was then an exclusive, sectarian and intolerant historic Christian community, to become someone who embraced all, and as a result became one embraced by all.

In 1883, Gibran was born high in the mountains of Lebanon, in the Qadisha Valley ("The Sacred Valley"), an area resounding with majestic natural beauty, and which served as the foundation of his spirituality and worldview for the rest of his life. His grandfather had been a Maronite priest, and thanks to his mother he was taught the great biblical stories, imagery that resonated with all the Abrahamic faiths and echoed throughout his future writing.

In contrast to these peaceful surroundings, Gibran was born into a period of political and interreligious strife during the latter part of a 400-year-long Ottoman occupation. Much of his early writing addresses sectarian strife, religious hypocrisy and corruption, leading to his determination to question ideologies and tear down walls of injustice.

Gibran was a natural mystic and his voice is timeless. He wrote: "Your neighbor is your other self dwelling behind a wall. In understanding, all walls shall fall down." As Gibran plumbed the depths of his inner life, he was forever exploring the deepest of life's questions. On the purpose of "being" he writes:



“HE WHO DOES NOT BEFRIEND HIS SOUL IS AN ENEMY OF HUMANITY”

“Spiritual awakening is the most essential thing in man's life, and it is the sole purpose of being.... He who does not befriend his soul is an enemy of humanity.... Life emerges from within....”

Gibran described himself as intentionally “going into the silence.” He wrote, “Only when you drink from the river of silence shall you indeed sing.” He named his New York studio “The Hermitage,” decorating it sparsely in a manner that created a contemplative atmosphere for him; with a simple wooden bed, several crucifixes made of wood and metal, a small brass chalice, an easel, and a tapestry of a Middle Eastern Jesus hung on the wall above an altar-like table with brass candlesticks.

Gibran listened to his life. He paid attention and was ever striving toward a deeper dimension. “The soul is mightier than space,” he wrote, “stronger than time, deeper than the sea, and higher than the stars.”

Repeatedly, Gibran focused in his work on love for God rather than religion: When asked, “What is religion?” he responded; “What is it? I know only life. Life means the field, the vineyard and the loom. . . The Church is within you. You yourself are your priest.”

In our contemporary culture, where it becomes harder and harder to listen to our inner selves, our souls, or even what we may need spiritually, Gibran exemplifies someone who journeyed intentionally inward; creating room for silence to listen to the quiet nudging's of his soul, intent on allowing both the high and low moments of life to weave together into one voice. And it is that “voice within a voice” that Gibran wanted his readers to hear when reading his writings.

The depth of Gibran's spiritual journey led to an extraordinary breadth of spirit in which he experienced the oneness of humanity. The reservoirs he had cultivated in “the deep” gave him the capacity to go “wide”. Arising from his internalized bridging of the Eastern and Western influences of his life, a faith emerged over time that transcended all cultures and religions.

Addressing his fellow Arabs in the Middle East, Gibran wrote: “Humans are divided into different clans and tribes, and belong to countries and towns. But I find myself a stranger to all communities and belong to no settlement. The universe is my country and the human family is my tribe. . . Thou are my brother because you are human, and we both are sons of one Holy Spirit; we are equal and made of the same earth”.

Gibran recognized the necessity of boundaries and nations, yet he strove toward a borderless citizenship that transcended geography. I love the way he expressed his collective embrace of humanity with the visual imagery of a cloud. He wrote: “Should you sit upon a cloud you would not see the boundary line between one country and another, nor the boundary stone between a farm and a farm. It is a pity you cannot sit upon a cloud.”

Addressing one of the most sensitive topics of all in the Middle East, religion, Gibran does so by looking to the nature of God. “You are my brother [and sister] and I love you. I love you worshipping in your church, kneeling in your temple, and praying in your mosque. You and I are all children of one religion, for the varied paths of religion are but the fingers of the loving hand of the Supreme Being, extended to all, offering completeness of spirit to all, anxious to receive all.”

Finding a way to communicate a nonsectarian version of spirituality was something that weighed heavily on Gibran. And consequently, he felt that all the events of his life seemed to lead him toward the creation of his most well-known book, *The Prophet*. Of *The Prophet* he wrote: “It is the biggest challenge in my life. My entire being is in *The Prophet*. Everything I have ever done before . . . was only a prelude to this.” He felt a sense of sacred responsibility, writing it almost as if it was to be a holy book. The writing process became a type of spiritual rebirth for him and embodying the East and the West, it speaks to people of all faiths.

As Gibran journeyed spiritually he sought to sift through his own religious upbringing, through the baggage, trappings and traditions

that had accumulated over the millennia. And as he searched more deeply into his own tradition, he discovered its core essence by re-discovering the figure of Jesus. He came to see the person of Jesus as a figure far beyond Christianity, and instead as a Universal Sage for all humanity.

In Jesus, Gibran saw an all-embracing figure and was enraptured by his character. He wrote: “His life is the symbol of Humanity. He shall always be the supreme figure of all ages.” One of my favorite vignettes of Gibran's is about separating the Jesus of history from the Jesus of a religion (Christianity) that grew up around him. He writes: “Once every hundred years Jesus of Nazareth meets Jesus of the Christian in a garden among the hills of Lebanon. And they talk long; and each time Jesus of Nazareth goes away saying to Jesus of the Christian. ‘My friend, I fear we shall never, never agree.’”

Although Gibran often spoke directly of God, his writings and art were infused with his deeper concern, that of living in harmony with one another and all of Creation. He wrote, “I bid you to speak not so freely of God, who is your All, but speak rather to and understand one another, neighbor unto neighbor.”

Just after Easter in 1931, after a battle with ill health, Gibran lay dying. At age 48, he slipped from this world into the realm he believed would be “an endless dawn, forever the first day”.

Gibran reminds us that it is time to reach across the divides that surround us and break down walls of inequality and injustice, to build bridges, and seek peaceful resolutions. It is time to defend the vulnerable and oppressed, to unite and see our own reflections in the faces of others. It is time to carve out room for quiet and respect for Creation, the environment. It is time to delve deeper in our own faith traditions, past outward imperfections, baggage and trappings, to the core of life.

I close with the words of Gibran's good friend and his first biographer Mikhail Naimy, “For some purpose unknown to you and to me Gibran was born in Lebanon at the time he was born. And for a reason hidden from you and me Arabic was his mother tongue. It would seem that the all-seeing eye perceived our spiritual drought and sent us this rain-bearing cloud to drizzle some relief to our parching souls.”

Paul-Gordon Chandler is an author, art curator, interfaith advocate, US Episcopal priest and an authority on Christian-Muslim relations. His new book is titled *IN SEARCH OF A PROPHET: A Spiritual Journey with Kahlil Gibran* (Rowman and Littlefield).

