Pioneers of a New Age

Kahlil Gibran (1883–1931)

Kahlil Gibran in 1897[1]

The poet, artist, philosophical essayist and novelist, Gibran Kahlil Gibran was a key-figure in the Romantic Movement that transformed 20th century Arabic Literature. But Gibran is probably best known for *The Prophet*, a book of prose poems that achieved cult status in the 1930's and again in the 1960's in the United States. While critics have dismissed him as a "populist poet," he is still one of the world's best-selling prose poets and the author of nearly 19 books. Although Gibran is usually classified as an iconoclastic Christian mystic, his work is a blend of Christianity, Islam, Sufism and Theosophy.

Jubran Kahlil Jubran was born in the village of Bsharri, at the edge of the stunning *Wadi Qadisha* or Sacred Valley on the slopes of Mt. Lebanon, to a humble Maronite[2] family. Despite the family's poverty and struggles with a temperamental father, Gibran's youth was filled with the beauty of his surroundings in which the snow capped mountains, the cliffs, deep gorges, crystalline rivers, and the "Cedars of God formed the heart of his youthful world."[3] The young Jubran was a lonely and contemplative child who loved to draw. He had a vivid imagination, an inquiring mind and a strong mystical bent that lead him to ascribe spiritual significance to all his life experiences.[4] These qualities, along with a wealth of inner resources, nourished and sustained him through difficult times and served as the source of his many creative endeavors.

However, the refuge of Bsharri and his own imagination were not enough. In 1881, Jubran's father, a tempermental man and hard-drinking gambler, was sent to prison for a tax irregularity and his property was confiscated. This was "the final blow that led to the family's collapse."[5] Jubran's mother, Kamileh, the daughter of a Maronite priest, who refused to acquiesce to the family's precarious state, left her husband in 1895, and sailed with Jubran and his three siblings to the tenements of South Boston as part of the Great Migration from the Middle East.

Once there, Jubran, now 11, began his formal education and was introduced to the visual and performing arts by the social workers at the nearby Denison House. But less than 3 years later, in 1898, Jubran or Gibran (the American spelling given to him in Boston), returned to Lebanon to study French, "cultivate his native language and become better acquainted with Arabian erudition."[6] Gibran not only longed

for the sanctuary of his native land, he also sought to find a "utopian state of existence" and "a higher world of metaphysical truth"[7] that would serve as the basis for his creative expressions. The great beauty of the country, its ancient history and its many sacred places of peace and power seemed to provide the perfect environment.

Gibran's hometown of Bscharri
(Author's photo)

Gibran's plans were thwarted when, after a fifteen-month stay in Lebanon, he was forced to return to Boston to visit one of his sisters who was gravely ill. She died before his arrival. His half-brother and mother died shortly thereafter. Gibran and his remaining sister Mariana, were heartbroken by these many losses, and fought to keep their faith in life.[8]

Despite having only a few friends and being cut off from relatives in Lebanon, Gibran decided to stay in Boston with his sister. It was during this phase that his nascent beliefs about man's immortality and death began to take shape. Life and death, as Gibran ultimately conceived of them, were not opposites, but "a great chain that allows man to persist in his ascent toward self-knowledge and God realization."[9] These thoughts culminated in what is thought to be one of the finest poems on the theme of *Death*, ever written. Part of the poem is excerpted here:

> You would know the secret of death.
> But how shall you find it unless you seek it in the heart of life?
> The owl whose night-bound eyes are blind unto the day cannot unveil the mystery of light.
> If you would indeed behold the spirit of death, open your heart wide unto the body of life.
> For life and death are one, even as the river and the sea are one.
> For what is it to die but to stand naked in the wind and to melt into the sun?
> And what is it to cease breathing, but to free the breath from its restless tides, that it may rise and expand and seek God unencumbered?[10]

It was also through these many aforementioned losses that Gibran would eventually come to understand the inevitability and spiritual significance of pain. Just as the Nichiren Buddhist teachings conceive of pain as a "peaceful practice," Gibran tells us to "watch with serenity the winter of your grief." "Pain," as he wrote in *The Prophet*, "is the breaking of the shell that encloses your understanding."[11] As his words in *Sand and Foam* reveal: "We choose our joys and sorrows long before we experience them." They are the "bitter potion by which the physician within you heals your sick self."[12] As one insightful interpreter of Gibran explains, "It is only when pain is misunderstood and unheeded that it is truly pain-

ful."[13] For if God is our higher or greater Self, "anything that gives us pain tells us that our self is not broad enough to contain the God that we are."[14]

Gibran also learned to take life-long solace in his belief in reincarnation—ideas he garnered from Vedic doctrine and certain Islamic philosophers who had been influenced by Neo-Platonic thought. He believed, for example, that death allowed for a rebirth to a higher state, that the bonds of love had the effect of bringing loving souls together, while hate and evil people were bound to others of the same mien. But "those souls that neither love nor hate remain self-contained as regards one another, and meet but once in the pattern of the ages."[15]

These beliefs, along with those on past lives, which are spread throughout his works, are conveyed in the following passage from *The Prophet*:

> This day has ended...
> Know, therefore, from the greater silence
> I shall return. Forget not that
> I shall come back to you.
> Dust and foam from another body.
> A little while, and my longing shall gather
> A little while, a moment of rest upon the wind, and another woman shall bear me.[16]

During this period, with the support of his sister, who offered to be the breadwinner for the family, Gibran threw himself into his work. He also found several wealthy patrons. It was at Denison House, where years before, he met Fred Holland Day, an eccentric Bostonian photographer and philanthropist, who persuaded him that he had a singular artistic vocation. Day was financially generous to the young boy and helped him mount his first exhibit in 1904. The exhibit was a success, and there were buyers for Gibran work, but before anything was formally sold, a fire in Day's studio destroyed the contents of the studio, including 24 years of Day's work and Gibran's entire portfolio.

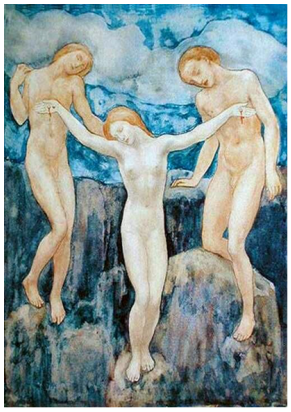
The young Gibran also developed a close and important relationship with Mary Haskell, a respected headmistress and onetime financier that lasted for the rest of his life. Haskell, who believed that money was a responsibility and not a possession, and that it needed to be put to right use, spent large sums of money to support Gibran. She also served as his literary collaborator and the editor of all his English works. At one point, she and Gibran organized a "world soul" course of literature for her prestigious girl's school in Boston. The course included selections and readings given by both Haskell and Gibran from the Egyptian Book of the Dead, the three great Athenian tragedians: Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides, as well as the Qur'an, Dante, Shakespeare, Goethe and others.

Haskell is credited with preserving Gibran's correspondence, his sketches and other memorabilia. And it was she who made it possible for him to undertake artistic training in Paris, where he studied for a time with Auguste Rodin.

In Paris, from 1908 to 1910, Gibran was exposed to the aesthetic revolution then taking place. However, cubist and fauvist ideas did not resonate with him. He was drawn instead to the symbolist painters, and to an interior vision based on religious mysticism, myth, the sensuous and the occult. He eventually left off formal training to paint on his own.

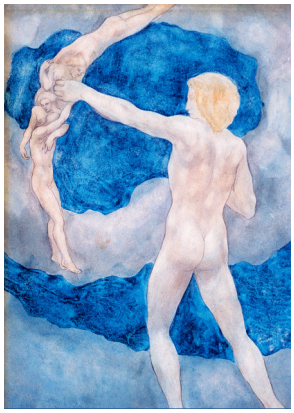
It was also during this time that Gibran wrote a book entitled *Al-Arawah-Mutamarida* or *Spirits Rebellious,* which condemned the injustice of the ruling class in Lebanese society and its religious ministers who colluded with the State. The work was filled with a new social philosophy based on the principles of freedom, social justice and spiritual independence. The four narratives in the book questioned religious authority, saying that: "True light is that which radiates from within,"[17] and has nothing to do with church hierarchy or a priest's authority. True religion, says Gibran, teaches joyousness and liberation. It gives men and women the wings of spirit "to soar aloft into the spacious firmament of love and freedom."[18] Other narratives examined such themes as the problem of materialism, the need for brotherhood and equality among all men, and "the plight of women in the Middle East, and its bigoted, oppressive and patriarchal system."[19]

Spirits Rebellious, with its new ideas and subversive characters caused such a stir that it was purportedly burned in the market places in Lebanon. Gibran was branded a heretic in much of the Arab world, where he was seen as a danger to morality, stability and peace. There was a failed assassination plot on his life in which he was wounded. Finally, Gibran was excommunicated from the Maronite Catholic church and exiled from his beloved Lebanon. Later, in 1931, at the time of his death at the age of 48, the order was rescinded and Gibran's body and his works were returned to Lebanon. He was heralded as a genius and patriot and given a highly elaborate funeral. But to this day the Catholic Church advises against Gibran's work, lest one be influenced by his heretical revisioning of Christianity, his "New Age" and sexually permissive thought, or his quasi-erotic art.



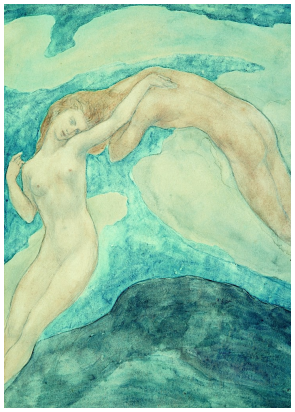
Serene Crucifixion

We must accept with serenity the winters of our grief.



The Archer

The child as the arrow, the parents as the bow, and God as the archer.



The Summit

Love, as it surrounds every being and extends to embrace those who dwell in the deepest valley.

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Gibran was an unconventional, free thinking Catholic, but he had immense admiration for Jesus Christ and his philosophy of life.[20] The majority of heroes in his written works, such as those in *Khalil the Heretic* and *John the Madman,* were firm believers in the teachings of Jesus.[21] Another of his works, *Jesus the Son of Man*, which was written after a profound mystical vision, rewrites the history of Jesus Christ; a history, according to his cousin and biographer, that would "complement the one-sidedness that was prevalent among scholar theologians on the nature of Christ."[22] The book describes the life of Jesus as seen through the eyes of his contemporaries. The church, Gibran thought, placed undue emphasis on Christ's divine nature. Therefore, Gibran's intention was to portray Christ's human nature and immanence. As Gibran saw it, Christ never intended to establish a hierarchical religious organization with rules and codes, nor did he believe that Jesus Christ ever assigned a physical place or a heaven where God the Father was present.[23]

In his poem "The Crucified" from *Secret of the Heart,* Gibran says:

> Jesus came not from the heart of the circle of Light to destroy the homes and build upon their ruins the convents and monasteries. He did not persuade the strong man to become a monk or a priest, but He came to send forth upon this earth a new spirit, with power to crumble the foundation of any monarchy built upon human bones and skulls.... Jesus was not sent here to teach the people to build magnificent churches and temples amidst the cold wretched huts and dismal hovels.... He came to make the human heart a temple, and the soul an altar, and the mind a priest.[24]

Returning to Boston in 1911, but still longing for his homeland, Gibran began a series of letters to *Mirat al-Gharb* (Mirror of the West), a

publication in New York that catered to Arab-Americans, Lebanese and Syrians, in which he encouraged his compatriots to throw off the yoke of Ottoman rule using non-violent means. He also spoke out about the divisions in Lebanon and Syria between the Druze, the Orthodox Christians and the Maronites, while insisting that the war then taking place (between Turkey and Italy) was not a conflict between Christians and Muslims.[25]

Although Gibran was brought up as a Maronite Christian, he was deeply influenced by both Bahá'í and Islamic thought. His appreciation for the Bahá'í can be seen in the parallels between passages in *The Prophet* and the writings of Abdu'l-Baha, who Gibran commemorated in a portrait.

Sufism, the esoteric dimension of Islam, played an especially important role in Gibran's writings, which are replete with Sufi concepts, symbols and images. Sufism, Gibran thought, was an antidote to Islamic extremism. This affinity for Sufism is clearly demonstrated in *al-'Awasif* (The Tempest), his book of essays on Ibn al-Farid, al Ghazali and Ibn Sina or Avicenna, three of the greatest Sufi philosophical and literary figures.[26]

Gibran's deep affinity with Sufism stemmed from the fact that it has much in common with other mystical and spiritual traditions and his own un-dogmatic and Universalist approach toward religion. These ideas are reflected in the following passage from *Iram Dhat al-'Imad* or City of the Lofty Pillars, a lost city or country mentioned in the Qur'an:

> There is no God but Allah... there is nothing but Allah. You may speak these words and remain a Christian, for a God who is good knows no segregation between words and names, and were a God to deny His blessings to those who pursue a different path of eternity, then there is no human who should offer worship.[27]

Gibran's rebellion against religious tyranny, injustice, and division in the Middle East won him much admiration among artists and writers in the émigré community. Thus he was compelled to move to New York, so that he could join his close friends, like Ameen Rihani, a Mason, and the so-called father of Arab American Literature, to be a part of an emerging Arab-American journalism.

While in New York, Gibran interacted with some of the most notable figures of the time: figures such as William Butler Yeats, Carl Gustav Jung and Rabindranath Tagore. He also became friends with Claude Bragdon, an architect, artist and Theosophist, who was the first person to publish the English version of Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum*, a book he helped to translate. Bragdon introduced Gibran to the teachings of his friend, P.D. Ouspensksy, whose ideas on art, beauty and spiritual matters were similar to his own. Ouspensky believed that art in the search of beauty was a path to the new 4th dimension, and to cosmic consciousness. Likewise, Gibran maintained that: "Art is a step from nature toward the Infinite"[28] and that "Beauty is eternity gazing at itself in a mirror." For Ouspensky, art and beauty must contribute to the perfection of humanity. For Gibran, it was not possible, as he writes in his poem *On Beauty,* to find perfection and beauty unless "beauty herself becomes the way and the guide."[29]

In one of Mary Haskell's recorded conversations, Bragdon suggests that Ouspensky's work appealed to Gibran because "it represented a bridge between Western rationalism and Eastern mysticism."[30] So deeply impressed was Gibran that he recommended Ouspensky's work, to the readership of the Arab world.

William Blake, Emanuel Swedenborg, Friedrich Nietzsche and Helena Blavatsky also helped to refine Gibran's thinking. Other influences included the New England Transcendentalists, such as Emerson, Whitman and the other American literary masters who drew their inspiration from Sufism. Buddhist thought also made an impression on Gibran, who appreciated it for its simple yet profound teachings on how to live life.

In New York Gibran was known to have frequented the salon of the arts patron, Alma Reed. The apartment, dubbed "the Ashram," was a meeting place for philosophers, poets and artists like Bragdon and Emil Bisttram,[31] and others who believed in Universal Brother-

hood and societal revolution by peaceful means.

Gibran, the poet, placed an emphasis on inspiration as opposed to intellectual knowledge. His poetry and written work were intended to convey the fundamental truths about life in clear and simply terms. "The teacher," he held, "who is indeed wise does not bid you to enter the house of his wisdom but rather leads you to the threshold of your mind."[32]

"The poet and artist," he often claimed, "expressed what was latent in the collective consciousness of the human race."[33] His symbolist paintings, which used mythological and classical figures, depict personal, as well as universal themes—themes ranging from Love and Self Offering, Despair, Death, the Awakening of Conscience, the Growth of the Spirit, the Struggle between Two Worlds, the Triad and Transfiguration. A number of the dreamlike figures in his paintings are floating in midair, free of the affiliations of the physical plane. The figures in his visionary paintings are often nude to depict purity, or to show the interconnections between man, nature and the spirit.

Significantly, much of Gibran's artwork and poetry were developed in tandem and serve to complement one another in the quest for truth and the spiritual aspiration for the meaning of existence. Although Gibran never received critical acclaim for his work, it is appreciated widely for its sincerity and ethereal beauty. As such, Gibran's art serves as an antidote to cynicism and the coarse materialism of the world.

Contributed by Donna M. Brown
Washington, D.C.

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1 Photograph by Fred Holland Day. Royal Photographic Society / National Media Museum / Science & Society Picture Library.

2 The Maronites are an Eastern Rite Catholic Church, named after St. Maroun, a 4th century hermit. They profess the Apostolic Faith, celebrate the same sacraments and are united with the Roman Catholic Pope, but they maintain their own distinct spirituality, theological liturgy and cannon law.

3 Jean Gibran & Khalil, G. Gibran, *Khalil Gibran: Beyond Borders* (Northampton, MA: Interlink Publishing Group, 2017) 9.

4 Ibid., 10.

5 Ibid., 17.

6 Joseph P. Ghougassian, ed., *Kahlil Gibran: Wings of Thought* (New York: Philosophical Library, Inc., 1973), 23.

7 Nadeem N. Naimy, "The Mind and Thought of Khalil Gibran," *Journal of Arabic Literature,* Vol. 5, 1974, 57.

8 Suheil Bushrui and Joseph Jenkins, *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet* (Oxford: One World Publications, 1998), 62-63.

9 Nadeem N. Naimy, "The Mind and Thought of Khalil Gibran," 64.

10 Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (1923, reprint; New York: Alfred A. Knoff, Inc. 1969), 80-81.

11 Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* , 52.

12 Kahlil Gibran, *Sand and Foam* (1926, reprint; New York: Alfred A. Knoff, Inc. 1969), 73.

13 Nadeem N. Naimy, "The Mind and Thought of Khalil Gibran," 65.

14 Ibid.

15 Joseph P. Ghougassian, ed., *Kahlil Gibran: Wings of Thought,* 220.

16 Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*, 94-95.

17 *Khalil Gibran: Collected Works* (New York: Alfred A. Knoff, 2007), 685.

18 Kahlil Gibran, *The Treasured Writings of Kahlil Gibran* (Brunswick, VIV: Castle Books, 2013), 327.

19 Suheil Bushrui and Joseph Jenkins, *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet*, 87.

20 Kahlil Gibran, *A Third Treasury of Kahlil Gibran* (Ontario: Citadel Press, 1979), 402.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 403.

23 Ibid., 404.

24 Kahlil Gibran, *The Treasured Writings of Kahlil Gibran*, 848.

25 Suheil Bushrui and Joseph Jenkins, *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet,* 7.

26 Ibid., 15.

27 Ibid., 215.

28 Kahlil Gibran, *Sand and Foam,* 83.

29 Kahlil Gibran, "On Beauty," *The Prophet*, 71.

30 Suheil Bushrui and Joseph Jenkins, *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet,* 161.

31 See for example: "Transcendental Abstractionist: Emil Bisttram, *The Esoteric Quarterly,* Volume10, No. 3, Fall 2014. http://www.esotericquarterly.com/issues/EQ10/EQ1003/EQ100314-End.pdf

32 Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet*, 56.

33 Robin Waterfield, *Prophet, The Life and Times of Khalil Gibran*, 228.

Book Review

***Integral Meditation: The Seven Ways to Self-Realisation*, by Kenneth Sørensen**, first edition, Kentaur Publishing, 2017. Paperback, 259 pages. List price US $25.00. Available at: Amazon.com. ISBN-10: 8792252192.

To the best of my knowledge, there are few published self-inquiry studies in the field of transpersonal psychology. This is paradoxical, but quite understandable, paradoxical because authors in this field are trained in exploring and sharing with peers their own experience of growth and research with transpersonal methods. Understandable because communicating one's own journey can be overwhelming. Apart from the barriers that language presents, an interpretative approach presupposes two challenges. First, that one is willing to face the possibility of being misunderstood, and second, that which one is publishing effectively serves the purpose of moving readers toward transformative practices. In *Integral Meditation: The Seven Ways to Self-Realisation*, Kenneth Sørensen offers a work that can open up a new method for inquiry that succeeds over both challenges.

Sørensen sets out to write "an introduction to energy psychology, which looks at life and existence in terms of different energies." (Preface, p. 15) His book accomplishes this goal. It describes the theory of energy psychology, its main ideas, origins and the methods used. Additionally, it has the great merit of sharing with the reader the author's own account of the journey, the challenges encountered, the discoveries made, and the twists and turns on the path.

Integral Meditation is a dedicated study of the application of transpersonal psychology as a method for spiritual growth. In particular, the author examines Assagioli's essays on human typology and elaborates on the Psychosynthesis model of the seven psychological functions or "functions of consciousness." In this regard, it is important to note that the author modifies Assagioli's model slightly. The seven functions redefined are: will, feeling, thought, imagination, logic, passion and action.

Sørensen also integrates other approaches, especially the Seven Rays Psychology described by Djwhal Khul /Alice A. Bailey, Sri Aurobindo's Yoga and Ken Wilber's Integral Theory. The book explores the Seven Rays (or "Ways of Life") as seven levels of consciousness and seven psychological types:

1) The Dynamic River of Life;
2) The Sensitive River of Life;
3) The Intelligent River of Life;
4) The Creative River of Life;
5) The Scientific River of Life;
6) The Idealizing River of Life; and
7) The Manifesting River of Life.

Each of these Ways of Life represents an energy current streaming forth from the Universal Source and coloring our psychological life. However, "the center of pure consciousness can never be the whole story of our identity. If that were the case we would all be the same… Consciousness *manifests* in many ways" (p. 29) and each of these are detailed by Sorensen's psychological study.

These many ways are aligned in the book to several meditation methods, which are sequentially introduced and discussed by Sørensen, and complemented by an extended appendix with practical meditation exercises. Arguably, some readers might feel that the discussion is hindered by the lack of references and index of terms, which could have provided an important additional resource. On the other hand, the charts and visuals are quite practical and will help the reader better understand the concepts the author presents.

In each chapter, self or qualitative inquiry is woven into the discussion of each of the psychological types. This type of inquiry, one of the most important contributions of this book, assumes that the writer's account of personal experiences and epiphanies is of methodolog-

ical value. The experiencer can't be divorced from the experience, the observed and the observer constitute one unit of consciousness.

Because of the author's personal approach, the book will be appeal to a range of readers. Those who are completely new to the Seven Rays psychology will find a straightforward description of each of these psychological types and gain familiarity with a variety of available meditation methods. Others may be motivated to explore the ray types in depth through further esoteric training.

Those who are more experienced will be stimulated by the way Sørensen integrates Assagioli, Aurobindo and Wilber with esoteric teachings, especially those of Djwhal Khul/Bailey's. They will be drawn to assess Sørensen's discussion about the model of psychological functions. Practitioners in the field will appreciate the value of the exercises compiled in the appendix, and possibly try them in their own practice or training workshops. I suggest that these two groups of readers will find a good companion in Sørensen's first book, *The Soul of Psychosynthesis: The Seven Core Concepts*, which I reviewed for the 2017 Summer issue of *The Esoteric Quarterly*.

Contributed by Miguel Malagreca
Turin, Italy