

## Gibran Khalil Gibran: The Person behind “The Prophet”

النبي، الشيخ جبران خليل جبران: الفنان،

*(Born January 6, 1883 in today's Lebanon. Died April 10, 1931 in New York City, USA)*

*Not all lives are long in terms of time. But they can be full and ardent in terms of creativity, seeking to span and perhaps even fuse diverse cultures. Kahlil Gibran's was one such life that, itself, spanned only forty-eight years. Yet he is still remembered for his most famous book, **The Prophet**,*

*Early on, Gibran expressed his desire “to write a book that heals the world.” Published exactly a century ago, **The Prophet** was that dream's fruition.  
- JSTOR Daily, 27 September 2023*

*Indeed, **The Prophet**, has never been out of print since it first appeared in 1923 and has meanwhile been translated from its original English into over 100 languages. For example, the passage below may be familiar to you, though you do not know its source.*

*When love beckons to you, follow him,  
Though his ways are hard and steep.  
And when his wings enfold you, yield to him,  
Though the sword hidden among his pinions may wound you...*

*This is Kahlil Gibran's “prophet” speaking about love. And this mystic also preached “counsels” on dozens of universal topics from marriage and children to crime and punishment (no pun intended!).*

*Yet, Gibran was an Arab mahjari (émigré) who, although he turned to writing in English, remained somehow estranged from his country of choice. Perhaps it was his very cultural isolation that prematurely cost him his life.*

\*\*\*\*\*

### **Early eclectic years. From Bsharri and Beirut to Boston and Back.**

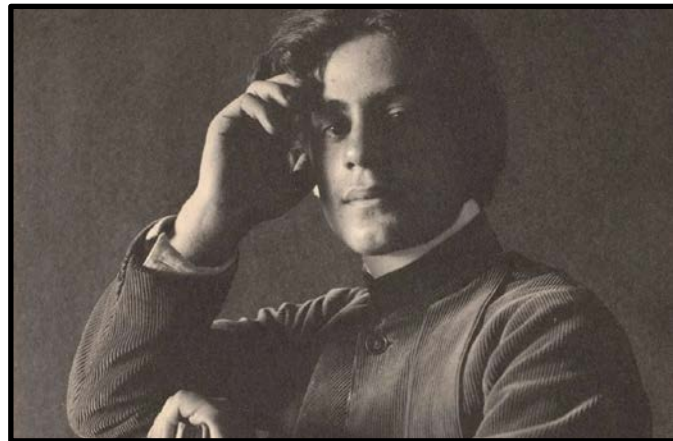
Khalil—a boy's name of Arabic origin meaning “friend”—was born as the second of four children on the sixth of January 1883 in Bsharri, a village in formerly Ottoman-ruled Syria, into a Maronite Christian family living in virtual poverty and in a predominantly Muslim society. Matters were made worse by the fact that Gibran's father was a gambler who was imprisoned for his debts, drinking and embezzlement.



**Mothers and Mentors.** That's when the decisive moment came for his **mother, Kamileh**, who was a warm, yet strong-willed woman, to make the decision that changed Kahlil's young life forever. SHE displayed **resilience** *writ large* in making the choice to leave Lebanon and her husband —unheard of in those days—with all four of her children and join her brother in New York, the world's cultural "melting pot".

Thus it was that in 1895, at the age of 12, young Gibran immigrated with his mother and three siblings to Boston's South End where she worked as a seamstress. He enrolled at school there where, we are told, his creative abilities were quickly noticed by a teacher who presented him to avant-garde photographer and publisher **F. Holland Day** where he became the subject of a photographic exhibit. He is young Kahlil's first mentor who encouraged him to "cultivate his fondness for nature, celebrating the power of love, a belief in the unity of all religions ..."

*Kahlil Gibran in 1897, the cover shot for his 1909-10 "Temple of Art" Exhibit*



**Mixing cultures.** But his family wanted Gibran to absorb more of his own Arabic heritage rather than just the Western aesthetic culture to which he was attracted. So in 1898 at the age of 15, Gibran returned to his native Lebanon to study Arabic literature and French for three years at the Collège de la Sagesse, the "college of wisdom", a Maronite-run school in Beirut. He did well for himself, becoming the "class poet" and graduating at eighteen in 1901 with high honors. Probably funded by Holland Day, Gibran then went from Beirut by way of Greece, Italy and Spain to Paris to learn painting. Life was decidedly good. But it didn't stay that way.

**Deaths, Back to Boston and the "Abyss".** On April 2, 1902, Kahlil's 14-year-old sister, Sultana, died from what is believed to have been tuberculosis. Upon learning this, 19-year-old Kahlil returned to Boston, arriving two weeks after her passing. TB being the contagious disease that it is, on March 12, 1903 elder brother Boutros died of the same disease, with their mother Kamileh passing from cancer on June 28, 1903. To bottom it out, just two days later, Kahlil's long-time lady friend, Josephine Peabody, to whom he had been romantically allied since 1898, "left him without explanation."

The years 1902-03, when Gibran was just twenty. From a life full of promise to a life full of pathos, this “fall from grace” had been swift and fateful. How to survive? Kahlil had only one remaining relative—his other younger sister, Marianna. They “circled the wagons” and, although illiterate, she thereafter supported Kahlil and herself by working at a dressmaker's shop. We see these tragedies only obliquely in his writings, but they are there—and their wounds went deep—into a soul as sensitive as his.

And yet he re-emerged, thanks to the “spiritual defiance of his own human spirit”. He was perhaps called by the work he knew he had to do.

**Gibran’s unique art, writings and subject matter.** Gibran was a prolific visual artist with over 700 works completed during his short lifetime. Besides working in oil, he also favored pencil and ink, aquarelles and gouache in the classical style. Luckily, art is more universal than language.



It bears repeating that Kahlil Gibran’s native language was Arabic, not English. These two come from two different “language families” and thus have many dissimilarities (see <https://www.daytranslations.com/blog/interpreting-english-arabic/#:~:text=Arabic> for a fascinating comparison.)

So, for starters, from the structural point of view, Arabic texts are written and read from right to left, using a cursive script. English, on the other hand, is written using Latin script and read from left to right. Also, in Arabic, there is no distinction between lower and upper cases and the punctuation rules are looser and more fluid compared to English.

***Arabic is a rich and ancient language, full of nuances.  
Just one example: Arabic has 23 words for our single word “love”!***

Regarding vocabulary, Arabic is richer and more nuanced. Whereas Arabic has over 12 million distinct words, English has just over 170,000. As for nuance, just one example: Arabic has 23 words for love! So it is clear that when Gibran switched from Arabic to English, it was a really *major* mental downshift and he relied heavily on native English speakers like Mary Haskell (see below) to give his direct English texts their properly nuanced meaning.

In terms of form, subject matter and style, Gibran wrote primarily poetry, parables, fables and aphorisms, as well as political essays, letters and dialogue snippets. These were consistently focused on overarching themes, such as religion, justice, science, free will, love, happiness and the soul, the body and death. He also grappled with the real and symbolic concepts of enslavement, education, women's liberation, Truth writ large, and the natural goodness as compared to the corrupted morals of society. Gibran, we are told, "avowedly imitated the style of the Bible." Heavily influenced by the King James' version, his characters often spoke in oratorical style, as if delivering delivering sermons or pronouncing oracles.

Finally, having permanently moved to America's East Coast, he was duly influenced by the likes of the Transcendentalists, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau and Walt Whitman, all of whom delighted in nature and underscored the universality of all men (and women).

**Debuts, Benefactresses and Second Paris Sojourn.** Coming out first as a visual artist, 21-year-old Gibran held the first art exhibition of his drawings in January 1904 in Boston at F. Holland Day's studio. There, as destiny would have it, he met Mary Haskell, the headmistress of a Boston girls' school, who was nine years his senior. However, the two bonded in a life-long friendship that lasted even beyond his passing.. Haskell also acted as his patroness and benefactress, investing both financially and socially in him to support his burgeoning career. One may speculate about the romantic aspects, but it is unambiguously clear that they were soul mates of a certain kind. (Recall a similar relationship between Tchaikovsky and his patroness Nadezhda von Meck.)



In July 1908, with Haskell's financial support, Gibran went back to study art in Paris. He had allegedly accepted her offer partly to distance himself from Émilie Michel (Micheline), a French teacher at Haskell's school who was his mistress. She, however, "to his surprise, came unexpectedly to Paris." There she became pregnant, but it was ectopic, and she had to have an abortion. Gibran never had children of his own although he wrote wistfully about them.

### Kahlil Gibran on Children

*Your children are not your children.  
They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself.  
They come through you but not from you,  
And though they are with you yet they belong not to you.*

*You may give them your love but not your thoughts,  
For they have their own thoughts.  
You may house their bodies but not their souls,  
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow ...*

Rather, at this stage, a different, more strident phase was emerging.

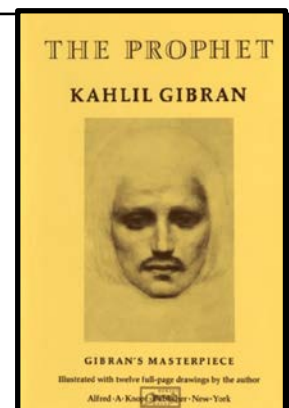
**From "Nietzschean rebellion ... ~~to Blakean pantheism to Sufi mysticism~~"**

His was perhaps the passionate rebellion of an other-worldly idealist. Whatever it was, in 1908 Gibran published *Spirits Rebellious* in Arabic, a novel deeply critical of authority, both secular and spiritual. It quickly backfired! According to an acquaintance, *"in an incredibly short time, (Gibran's book) was burned in the market place in Beirut by priestly zealots who pronounced it 'dangerous, revolutionary, and poisonous to youth'."*

Still, he continued with his rebellion. In 1912, the poetic novella *Broken Wings* was published in Arabic, followed by another, *A Tear and a Smile*, also in Arabic and published in 1914.

**Kahlil Gibran's Spiritual Pivots and Evolutions**

In 1903 at age 20, Gibran had had to deal with the swiftly successive deaths of all but one of his family members. But he remained in America and continued to evolve artistically, even revolting against his Arabic culture of birth. But by 1918, Gibran's role had shifted from that of an angry young man to that of a prophet, perhaps in the image of a latter day Jesus? In 1923, after a decade of polishing, "The Prophet" came out, with this cover (something of a self-image?).



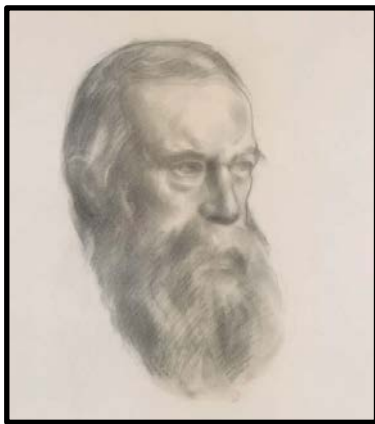
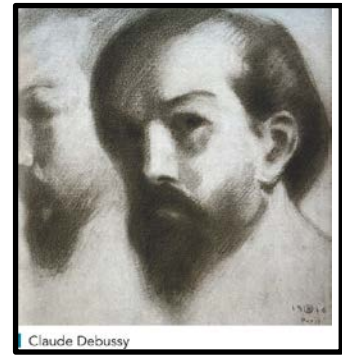
But let us back up a bit. There were some incisive intermediary stages first.

**... to Blakean pantheism.** Pantheism is defined as "the religious belief that

God is in everything in nature and the universe" and is reflected, *inter alia*, in the works of English poet William Blake, who played a pivotal role in Gibran's artistic life. Gibran had acquired superficial knowledge of some of Blake's poetry and artwork during his early years in Boston, but he was re-introduced to it in Paris, most likely by sculptor Auguste Rodin during one of their two encounters there after Gibran had begun his "Temple of Art" portrait series. At left, the "Evocation of Sultana Tabat" in 1908.



This “Temple of Art” Paris Exhibit that opened in 1909 was the 26-year-old Gibran’s OWN and marked his new-found artistic maturity. Here’s the blurb under <https://www.kahlilgibran.com/archives/written-works/365-katharine-gordon-kahlil-gibran-a-fire-that-consumes-ink-and-paper-gallery-issue-06-winter-2020-pp-20-35/file.html>. This was an “ongoing series of portraits of accomplished artists, writers, political figures, and intellectuals. It began with a portrait of sculptor Paul Wayland Bartlett (1865-1925), whose bronze nudes show similarities in form to Gibran’s renderings of the human body.



Then Gibran sat with many influential figures to capture their likeness and distinct personalities, thereby developing an aptitude for *seeing into the souls of his subjects and translating their personality into visual language.*” Among his other subjects: *Claude Debussy (above) Auguste Rodin (left), and Edmond Rostand sat for the young Lebanese artist. Later he would add Thomas Edison, philosopher Carl Gustav Jung, actress Sarah Bernhardt, William Butler Yeats and General Giuseppe Garibaldi in New York City.*

It is said that, *“of all the impressions absorbed by Gibran during his Parisian sojourn, none had a greater and more lasting influence on him than his re-discovery of **William Blake**... he owed more to the Englishman than to any other poet, art or philosopher.”* In particular, Gibran agreed with Blake's *apocalyptic vision* of the world as expressed in latter’s poetry and art. Here at right, God ... JSTOR<sup>1</sup>, a digital storage archive, writes that Gibran actually saw himself “in the same poet-artist lineage” as his hero, William Blake.



<sup>1</sup> JSTOR stands for “Journal Storage” and is a protected electronic archive of leading journals across many academic disciplines. It provides text-searchable, high-quality pdf facsimiles of each journal article from a publication’s inception up to the past 3-5 years. It is a highly regarded source amongst researchers.

*"The Prophet, with its prose poems and aphoristic, oracular style, became the 1960s America's "counter-culture alternative to the Bible".*

... to Sufi mysticism and "God of New Age Spirituality beyond Religion"



*"Sufism: a mystical Islamic belief and practice through which Muslims seek to find the truth of divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of God." As in Rumi, whirling dervishes and so. The three Sufi principles are humility, charity and truth.*

Gibran appeared on the American scene at precisely the ripe moment—at the outset of a new century just when America had stepped onto the world stage as a major power. As an immigrant mystical poet, one might have thought him thrice estranged from his newly chosen culture but, actually, that worked to his benefit. He was petted—i.e. photographed in Arabic garb—and feted—frequenting Boston's literary circles—as no other at that particular moment. Might Gibran have even mistaken *himself* for "The Prophet"? Valid question.

In any case, extending himself beyond conventional religion, his "philosopher-poet-priest" image brought him converts and patrons. One early academic paper described *The Prophet* as a "monumental work of theosophical mysticism in relation to man, God and nature, without adhering to any one particular religious paradigm". Indeed, his message maintained that "everything also contains the elements of its opposite, and that oneself is both irreducibly alone and inconceivably part of a larger whole so that we do not 'learn', but mysteriously 'discover' our inner selves." (JSTOR, "Godfather of the New Age", p.4). It's up to us.



*"The teacher does not bid you enter the house of his wisdom, but rather leads you to the threshold of your own mind." That is to say, the truth comes only from within **yourself.***

... but one must actually aim **higher** in order to **become** who one is destined to be. That takes work. Here just some words of wisdom from Viktor Frankl, the philosophical foundation for this book:

*“If we take man as he **is**, we make him worse,  
but if we take him as he **should** be,  
we make him capable of becoming what he **can** be.”*  
—Viktor Frankl, 1972.  
See blog <https://fs.blog/viktor-frankl-why-to-believe-in-others/>

... and so, again, how to get there? Gibran wrote extensively on the topic of “becoming”. Below we have this in the context of evolving from youth to age.

### Youth and Age: Kahlil Gibran on the Art of Becoming

<https://www.themarginalian.org/2023/04/04/youth-and-age-kahlil-gibran/>

This insightful piece by Bulgarian-born blogger, Maria Popova, deserves a special place in my book about resilience. Nevertheless, it has to be shortened (but not plagiarized). Just as the poem itself is Kahlil’s, so the commentary is Maria’s.

To start with, she says something that deeply resonates with my 80-year-old body; the one I call “Rosinante” in respect for Don Quixote’s proud steed:

*“The unfolding of life does more than fray our bodies with entropy – it softens our spirit, blunting the edge of vanity and broadening the aperture of beauty, so that we become both more ourselves and more unselfed, awake to the felicitous interdependence of the world.*

*And yet the selves we have been – young and foolish, hungry for the wrong things, hopeful for the right but winged by hope into hubris – are elemental building blocks of who we become, unsheddable like the hydrogen and helium that made the universe.*

That transmutation is what Lebanese poet Kahlil Gibran takes up with uncommon soulfulness in his long poem “Youth and Age,” penned in his early forties, shortly after he completed *The Prophet* and before he died at only 48. In a sentiment consonant with the aging Walt Whitman’s reckoning with what makes life worth living, he traces his path. *Kahlil Gibran, self-portrait*





In my youth the heart of dawn was in my heart,  
and the songs of April were in my ears.  
But my soul was sad unto death,  
and I knew not why.  
Even unto this day I know not why I was sad.

But now, though I am with eventide,  
my heart is still veiling dawn,  
And though I am with autumn,  
my ears still echo the songs of spring.  
But my sadness has turned into awe,  
and I stand in the presence of life and life's daily miracles.

The difference between my youth which was my spring,  
and these forty years, and they are my autumn,  
is the very difference that exists between flower and fruit.



A flower is forever swayed with the wind  
and knows not why and wherefore.  
But the fruit overladen with the honey of summer,  
knows that it is one of life's homecomings,  
as a poet when his song is sung knows sweet content,  
Though life has been bitter upon his lips.

\*\*\*\*\*

**Befriending Time.** “With an eye to the restlessness of youth, Gibran echoes his earlier reflections as he contemplates what might be the supreme reward of growing older — our widening capacity for patience, for the spaciousness that meets life on its own terms and becomes one with the unfolding mystery.”

Our resistance, our “averse reactions” to evolving spiritually often reveal less about the nature of the things we abhor than about the nature of the blinders that limit our understanding.

“In my youth I loved beauty and **abhorred ugliness**,  
for beauty was to me a world separated from all other worlds.  
But now that the gracious years have  
lifted the veil of picking-and-choosing from over my eyes,

I know that all I have deemed ugly  
in what I see and hear, is but a blinder  
upon my eyes, and wool in my ears;  
And that our senses, like our neighbors,  
hate what they do not understand.



A century before science illuminated the poetics of wintering trees as a lens on renewal, Gibran wrote:

"In my youth, of all seasons I **hated winter**,  
for I said in my aloneness,  
"Winter is a thief who robs the earth of  
her sun-woven garment, and  
suffers her to stand naked in the wind.  
But now I know that in winter  
there is re-birth and renewal, and that  
the wind tears the old raiment to cloak her  
with a new raiment woven by the spring."

"Touching on a concept known in the Eastern spiritual traditions as non-identification — the ability to inhabit our vaster nature beyond transient circumstances and conditions!—Gibran wrote:

"In my youth I was but the slave of the high tide and  
the ebb tide of the sea, and  
the prisoner of half moons and full moons.  
Today I stand at this shore and  
I rise not nor do I go down.

Yes, in my youth I was a thing, sad and yielding, and  
 all the seasons played with me and laughed in their hearts.  
 And life took a fancy to me and kissed my young lips,  
 and slapped my cheeks.  
 Today I play with the seasons. And  
 I steal a kiss from life's lips ere she kisses my lips.

And I even hold her hands playfully that  
 she may not strike my cheek.  
 In my youth I was sad indeed, and  
 all things seemed dark and distant.  
 Today, all is radiant and near, and for this  
 I would live my youth and the pain of my youth,  
 again and yet again.

And, the Buddhists say that we **will** live many lives “again and yet again”. It seemingly **takes** many lifetimes for us to learn the essentials of living.

\*\*\*\*\*

**New York, Early Fame and Early Death.** In 1911, Gibran settled into New York's Greenwich Village, moving into one of its *avant-garde* artists' studios where he would live until his death twenty years later. Gibran did re-found the Pen League with fellow Mahjari Arab emigré poets in 1920, but, as a life decision, he had dared to switch cultures and languages. A **major move**.

Before his 30th birthday (1913), his first book in English, *The Madman*, had been published; his visual artwork had also enjoyed major showings in New York; and by his 40th year in 1923, *The Prophet* came out and was an instant success. And yet. And yet ... his star was on the wane. So was his health.

Gibran had actually planned two sequels to his masterpiece. One of them actually materialized: *The Garden of the Prophet*, a lesser-known companion piece, was published in 1935 but did not create the buzz of its forerunner. The second sequel would have been *The Death of the Prophet*, but Gibran himself never lived to see it as he died before its completion.

Was New York an optimal ambiance for such a sensitive soul? Gibran himself referred to his studio as a “hermitage”, which suggests that he sought refuge

there. Artists are perhaps always those who are most essentially *alone*, despite company.

### *On a personal note*

*Gibran I first "met" as a college student at Mills in the San Francisco Bay Area in 1964 and wanted to focus my comparative literature thesis on him. Alas, although he was "all the rage" just then, I was told that he wasn't "important" enough, his style being too facile, too florid. I remember that put-down until this day because I didn't agree then—and I don't agree now.*

*What I do find tragic though is his premature embrace of aging and dying. Today, at 80, I would say it's all about attitude. Attitude and environment. Gibran lived as an emigré in big, bustling but somehow uncaring New York City where one is feted and forgotten in quick order; he died at only 48. Would that he had returned alive to his Lebanese Mar Sarkis monastery "garden" which today houses his remains and a museum to his memory.*

*As for this author, today I live in a senior residence in the cultural oasis of Vienna. And yet I fight hard against the resigned, past-obsessed attitude that permeates this place. That is the very reason I write about resilience! To keep my heart beating and soul still alive and curious about today and tomorrow and the rich future that could await us. Carpe diem!*

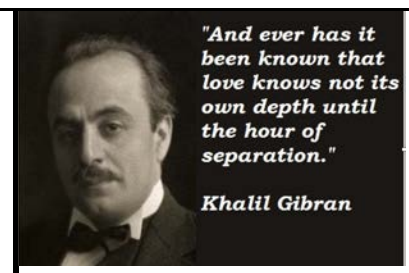
Over time, New York overwhelmed that once-bashful Bsharri boy and isolated him into the realms of his own reflections. Thus, "ostensibly often for reasons of health," Gibran would spend "longer and longer periods away from New York." In Nature. At the seaside. But it is no secret that Gibran began to drink heavily in his final years, perhaps even looking forward to leaving this cacophonous world. Here is what he wrote in the guise of "the Prophet":

### *Kahlil Gibran on Death*

*You would know the secret of death.  
But how shall you find it unless you seek it in the  
heart 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 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? ...*

*For when the earth shall claim your limbs, then shall you truly dance.*



After Gibran’s premature passing, Mary Haskell, his most loyal soul mate and benefactress, carried through on everything he had requested of her. She placed Gibran’s art in prestigious collections, including New York’s Metropolitan Museum, the Fogg Art Museum in Cambridge, Massachusetts and both artwork and artifacts to his hometown museum in Bsharri, Lebanon where the plaque below commemorates his life and work.

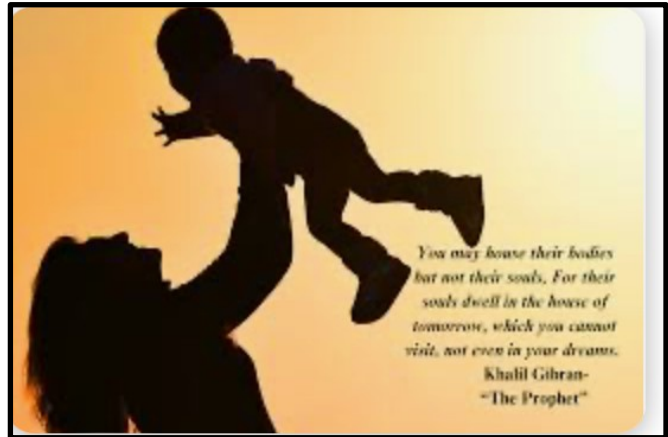


Thus, Gibran is deeply remembered, even unto this day, almost a century after his passing.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Interactive Workbook Questions

Whatever your age or current stage of life, interacting with these historic or contemporary profiles can spice up your own life, calling up comparisons with the figures featured here. Take a vivid “walk down Memory Lane” and recall challenges that you faced—whether you overcame them or just barely survived with bruisingly useful “lessons learned”. This can help you rev up your right-now resilience. *Dare to explore Kahlil Gibran’s esoteric world and how it might apply to YOU in today’s everyday one.*



1. Have you, the reader, ever read Gibran’s “The Prophet”? If so, under what circumstances and what was the effect, if any, that it had on you?
2. Of all of Gibran’s 26 topics in the timeless spiritual wisdom “The Prophet”—from “The Coming of the Ship” to Love, Marriage, Children, Giving, Eating and Drinking, Work, Joy and Sorrow, Houses, Clothes, Buying and Selling, Crime and Punishment, Laws, Freedom, Reason and Passion, Pain, Self-Knowledge, Teaching, Friendship, Talking, Time, Good and Evil, Prayer, Pleasure, Beauty, Religion, Death and “The Farewell”—which of these topics inspire, invigorate—or perplex and antagonize!—you the most? These are the ones that need dealing with. Start a psychological investigation here... to continue on your own.
3. Whether young or old, have you some clear idea of your life’s mission? If still young, how will you realize it? If old, DID you realize it? What are the things, young or old, that you need to do now? **Important.**
4. Are you, like William Blake and Kahlil Gibran, a pantheist who sees God in all things and beings? Or a believer in Sufi mysticism like Rumi? If not, why not? What is your religious persuasion and how does it serve your lifestyle?

5. Should you believe in reincarnation—and could choose the time, place, gender and focus of your next life—how would you see yourself re-emerging on this Earth? As a “prophet”? Or maybe rather as Taylor Swift or Elon Musk or someone else? Maybe your very own SELF! Can you **explain** your choices and their implications for the future?

\*\*\*\*\*