

Kansas Farm Boy

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George Ronald, 1985

I grew up on a farm outside Topeka, Kansas, and to people in Topeka, we lived in the sticks. We were a devout Lutheran family. There was no question about it. As soon as I was old enough to go, my grandmother took me to Sunday School. While my class was being held, she taught one herself, continuing until she was nearly eighty.

Looking back, I can see threads where the Bahá'í Faith had been indirectly woven into my life. During the long winter evenings we would beg our father to show the family movies. We had each Christmas, each birthday, and other momentous events on film. One movie was of a trip that a group of farm wives, including my mother and grandmother, took to see Chicago. The tour stopped briefly at the Bahá'í House of Worship. Since 1956 the House of Worship had been in our family movies – but no one knew what it was.

I remember coming home from church some Sundays and watching the last bit of an interesting TV show. We only saw the last few minutes and then a man would 'sweep' the credits off the screen with a broom. Years later, when I read *God Loves Laughter*, I learned more about the mysterious show. It was Bill Sears' 'In the Park.'

While I was junior high age, the Topeka Assembly placed a booth at the local fair. I was drawn to the pictures of the Houses of Worship. They looked religious, but they weren't churches! I didn't recognize the name Bahá'í and wanted to learn about it, but being a shy farm boy, I ran away from the kind old lady sitting in the booth.

The two family farms were next to each other, and before I went to school, I would walk across the pasture to Granma's. Our relationship deepened as I grew, and naturally we talked about religion. On summer nights we would stay up past midnight talking. We were sure the end of the

world was near and that Jesus was on His way. Granma didn't always agree with the church (sometimes I was surprised at how much she disagreed), but she believed in Jesus. She also told me so much about her life and family that I feel I have lived the entire century.

In the seventh and eighth grades, I became fascinated with past civilizations and their beliefs. They didn't have the Bible, since they lived before Jesus. Would God really condemn them for living in the wrong time? And what about the books which had been excluded from the Bible? Who decided they were no longer holy? I decided to find those 'lost' books to determine for myself if they were the Word of God. I also wanted to study the Holy Books of other religions. Why should someone decide for me that Buddha was a heathen? Or Zoroaster?

In my Lutheran confirmation class, the minister of the family church explained that after confirmation each of us would be responsible for our own spiritual education as adults. That was all I needed. I took him at his word and began to study all the religions I could. In Sunday school I had learned a lot of Jewish history but nothing of other religions and wanted to make up for lost time.

In high school I began to build my library, and read the Apocrypha, the *Book of Mormon*, *Worlds in Collision*, and other books. While continuing my religious education, I did not neglect church activities. I ushered and taught Sunday school for four years, was elected president of the youth group, and twice wrote the children's Christmas program. I was a 'good' boy and did the 'right' things.

The dichotomy between my actions and beliefs didn't bother me since I considered myself a liberal unorthodox Christian. With that label, I felt all right about my actions. As an usher, I could slip away from the service relatively unnoticed and go to a deserted room in the basement for my own service. When the organ began, I returned upstairs and finished ushering. I could do my things and theirs too.

The minister was set against any alteration in the order of the service. He would not even allow one youth Sunday a year. I kept my feelings more and more to myself, began listening to the Radio Church of God, and stopped taking communion. When I read the Church Constitution one Sunday, I realized that I didn't believe those things at all.

The Radio Church of God was heavy on the imminent return of Jesus, and my grandmother and I fully believed it would happen soon. I would lie awake at night, fearful that I would be 'asleep' and miss Him when He came. My most ardent prayer was not to miss Jesus.

In my senior year, the instructor of my speed-reading class told us to obtain books on a topic we were interested in. I bought my first books on the occult, and reading them was a journey into a fascinating world I had always hoped existed. That year my horizons were expanded out of this world! I willed myself to see auras, anticipating events, and interpret dreams, and fancied inventorying past lives.

The summer after high school, I enrolled in a college class: Composition I. It was taught by a Bahá'í. This was the turning point. My papers and his comments made for a running conversation which ran right to the Faith! He invited me to a fireside, and of course, I went.

At the fireside, I saw a photo of the House of Worship and I fell in love with it. And I was amazed by the people. I knew, from the moment I entered the house, that this little group had something special, and I wanted to be part of it. For the first time in my life I felt treated like an individual. The Bahá'ís were interested in me (not my family, or school, but me!) and accepted me for what I was at that moment. But no one inquired if I wanted to join and I was too shy to ask. They simply kept inviting me back, and I kept going.

I learned a lot in the next six months. I took three versions of the Bible and a Bible dictionary, and discovered for myself that Jesus taught that Heaven and Hell were conditions, not places. I learned the meaning of several puzzling dreams of long standing. I let go of the occult. With no transportation, I couldn't go to the family church, but visited the ones nearby and became aware of the similarities among Christian churches.

Prior to the first Bahá'í Week in Topeka, in November 1969, I was sent a list of the week's activities. Some weren't too interesting, but there was to be a free meal. Poverty-stricken at the time, that appealed to me. I talked my landlady into going so I could have a ride. Following this dinner for the Birth of Bahá'u'lláh, the film, 'A New Wind' was shown. I didn't want the movie to end. When a Bahá'í offered me a ride to see it a second time, I accepted.

Before the second showing, I was invited to dinner with a few Bahá'ís – an evening I will remember for the rest of my life. The spirit and laughter were more nourishing and memorable than the delicious food. The stories this warm and loving group of friends exchanged gave a whole new meaning to 'family' and 'community'. God was getting me ready.

I don't remember the movie. I don't remember the talk or the discussion that followed. But as we left the building, a Bahá'í from another town, who had seen me once at a fireside, waved from a

distance and called out, “Good-bye, Duane.” I was stunned! She remembered my name! I was barely a fleeting insignificant acquaintance, but she remembered my name!

My mind did not stop whirling. Later that night in bed, I carefully examined what the Bahá’ís believed and what I personally believed. Point by point I went over what I knew, and was a bit surprised to find how many of our beliefs matched. I realized that if I were not to be a hypocrite, then I was unquestionably a Bahá’í. I had no choice. I wasn’t forced. No one was with me or knew what I was thinking. I believed what the Bahá’ís believed – therefore I was a Bahá’í.

Little did I anticipate the effects of my logical and reasonable conclusion. Some people rock the family boat – I think I sank mine. One uncle acted as if I were a fire-breathing dragon about to devour his children, and once nearly threw me out of his house. My aunts were sure my soul was on its way to Hell. My mother still refuses to say Bahá’í correctly. And I broke my grandmother’s heart. Religion is seldom talked about when I’m around.

Over the years, however, the situation has improved a great deal. My uncle stayed home from church one Sunday to watch ‘And His Name Shall Be One’ on TV. He feels I have become a nearly normal person, especially since I’ve gotten married and became a father. An aunt has begun asking about the Bahá’í trips I take. My mother adores her grandchildren. My grandmother and I looked at *Bahá’í World, Vol. XIV*, page by page. She was impressed by the pictures of so many different kinds of people who seemed so happy; she was outraged at the destruction of the House of Worship in ‘Ishqábád. And nine years after I began going to firesides, my brother embraced the Cause of God.

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