

THE CHOSEN PATH

Stories of How Everyday People Became Bahá'ís

Researched & Edited by
Jonathan King

Published by Amazat Publications

THE CHOSEN PATH

Stories of How Everyday People Became Bahá'ís

Compiled and Edited

By
Jonathan King

AZMP
Azamat Publications

Azamat Publications, Publisher
3503 Cookstown Dr., Austin, Texas 78759

Copyright © Jonathan King 2005
All rights reserved
ISBN 0-9758620-0-6

Cover and book design: Reddy & Associates



TO MY MOTHER,

WHOSE SPIRITUAL WISDOM
AND GUIDANCE PLAYED A
MAJOR ROLE IN LEADING
ME TO THE DOOR OF FAITH.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



This anthology of stories took over three years to collect and edit and would not have been possible without the valuable contribution of each storyteller. I want to thank all of the writers who took the time and courage to share their personal journeys with me.

I want to give particular thanks to Lynn Yancy for her advice and encouragement during the beginning of the editing process.

To Arlene Jenrich and Audrey Lindau for their contributions as co-editors. To my wife for her encouragement, advice, and support during the years it took to complete this project.

Finally, I want to thank Bob Reddy for his enthusiasm and encouragement in bringing this concept into reality through his skills as an artist and typesetter.

TABLE OF CONTENTS



Introduction.....	v
The Steed of This Valley Is Patience	
1. Tricia Hague-Blackford, The Missing Word, New Zealand.....	1
2. Robert Travell, The Answer, United States	9
3. Diane A. Mahboubi, Escape From Iran, United Kingdom.....	13
In Their Search, They Have Stoutly Girded Up the Loins of Service	
4. Carol Mullen, I Took New A Name, United States	20
5. Reginald Newkirk, I Must Be A Baha’i, Canada	25
6. Yusef Tarwala, The Heretic, India	30
It Is Incumbent On These Servants That They Cleanse The Heart	
7. Agatha Nketisiah, If God Were So Loving, Ghana	34
8. Kyle Whitfield, A Letter From God, Canada	37
9. Lois Kulecho, The Queen of Carmel, Kenya.....	40

In Our Ways We Will Guide Them

- 10. Jeanette Corsino,
Fishing On The Net, United States45
- 11. Scott Brodie, O Ye Fishermen, United States48
- 12. Julius Garga, I Am A World Citizen, Nigeria51

At Every Moment He Findeth A Weighty Matter

- 13. Damansane Gama,
The Ball With A Name, Swaziland54
- 14. Aneri Santiago, The Road To Bahia, Brazil56
- 15. Kathi Ruiz, Faith In a Box, United States63

**At Every Step Aid From The Invisible Realm
Will Attend Him**

- 16. Ha Le, Remember My Days, Vietnam67
- 17. Jonathan King, Door of Faith, United States71
- 18. Chief Michael Uwadianoe, The Prisoner, Nigeria77

**The True Seeker Hunteth Not But
The Object Of His Quest**

- 19. Joyce Raine, Jesus Café, United States81
- 20. Lou Meyer, Blooming Like the Rose, United States87
- 21. Eve Mnisi, A Light In The Darkness, Swaziland92

**Nor Shall The Seeker Reach His Goal
Unless He Sacrifice All Things**

- 22. Rennett Grove, Bed of Love, South Africa99
- 23. Charles Duncan, Turned Back To God, China105
- 24. Estelle Perkins, At Last, United States109

Labor Is Needed If We Are To Seek Him

- 25. Miguel Watler, Daniel’s Words Ring True, Canada...115
- 26. Vision Poole, Then Came The Voice, United States ..119
- 27. Diane Tufts, Flower Child, United States.....124

On This Journey The Traveler Abideth In Every Land

- 28. Joel Caverly,
Do This In Remembrance, Trinidad& Tobago128
- 29. Adrienne Ellis Reeves,
The Day of Celebration, United States131
- 30. Allen Forsyth,
The Temple In The Midst, Scotland.....135

In Every Face He Seeketh the Beauty Of The Friend

- 31. Kurt Hein,
Welcome Home Brother, United States139
- 32. Gertrude White,
The Man With the White Beard, United States.....145
- 33. Natalija Utenkova,
The Water of Life, Russia147

He Joineth Every Company, And Seeketh Fellowship With Every Soul

- 34. Elisabeth Appels,
Taking the Cake, The Netherlands153
- 35. Dan Mitchell,
The African Paddler, United States159
- 36. Glenn & Evelyn Asplund,
Kicked Out Of The Garden, United States161
- 37. Fitzgerald Clark, Sparks of Peace, Barbados.....166

O Compassionate God!

Thanks Be To Thee For Thou Hast Awakened Me

- 38. Adelia Ellis,
The Moment I Was Conceived, United States171
- 39. Jesse Fish,
Struggles With Life and Darkness, United States174
- 40. Guadalupe Flores,
Writings On The Wall, Honduras178
- 41. Barbara McAtee,
Are You My Child, United States180

Make Firm Our Steps, O Lord, In Thy Path

- 42. Jennifer Hall, Do You Want To Sign?, China188
- 43. Ida Spruill,
For All The Right Reasons, United States193
- 44. Judith Alexander,
Dancing In The Garden, United States196
- 45. Naledi Raspberry,
The Belly Dancer, United States199

INTRODUCTION



‘The Chosen Path’ is a diverse collection of stories about how people from many walks of life became attracted to the Bahá’í Faith and the universal teachings of its Prophet-Founder, Baha’u’llah (ARABIC FOR “THE GLORY OF GOD.”) The stories you are about to read include real life experiences. Forty-five individuals narrate their own stories how they were introduced to the Bahá’í Faith and the reasons why they ultimately committed their lives and their hearts to it. These people are diverse: from an American women who frequently visited a religious chat room called ‘Jesus Café’, to an African Minister who was wrongly jailed for six months without bail, these anecdotes give a unique and intimate portrayal of how each one sustained this spiritual journey.

The stories highlighted in this book will appeal to Bahá’ís, and also those who are investigating this Faith for the first time. While the Bahá’í Faith offers a wealth of information about its theological beliefs, divine laws, and views on moral behavior, these anecdotes answer questions that naturally surface when it comes to choices around religious change and the search for truth. Why do people become Bahá’ís? What induced these people to declare their belief in Baha’u’llah? How did they adjust to being Bahá’ís, and what was the reaction from their family and friends, as they observed the religious practices of a new way of life? What kind of effects did such a transformation have on their spiritual growth and outlook on life?

In his illuminating book “ The Seven Valley’s and the Four Valley’s, Bahá’u’lláh explains in the chapter “ Valley of Search”, the essential spiritual qualities that are needed by a seeker to fulfill the requirements of his or her journey to the summit of truth. I have excerpted twelve verses from the “Valley of Search” and used it as themes throughout the book. Each story is connected with one of the twelve themes in the book.

As you read these stories, you will vicariously experience the challenges, frustrations, misperceptions, joys, and serendipitous events that led each of these authors to discovering his or her personal path to the Bahá’í Faith. The ways to each path are different, yet similar. Although a deep knowledge about the history and beliefs of the Bahá’í Faith is not required to appreciate the general context of these stories, a cursory introduction of the Faith will help to give the reader some background about terms and definitions which are commonly used by its members.

The Bahá’í Faith was founded over 100 years ago in Persia by Baha’u’llah, the son of a nobleman from the city of Teheran in the 19th Century. After giving away his wealth at a very young age, Baha’u’llah was subsequently persecuted and imprisoned, and eventually exiled with a small group of his followers to Iraq. Further exiles were carried out and lasted for another 30 years. After being exiled to Turkey, the Turkish government exiled him to the prison city of Akka in Israel. It was from this prison city that He wrote many of His most important sacred books and letters. He addressed the sovereign political and religious leaders of the world, despite being held a prisoner by the Turkish Empire, and claimed that his coming fulfilled the prophecies of all ages and religions.

Bahá’ís view Baha’u’llah as the most recent prophet from God and acknowledge that the One True God divinely inspires all of the world’s major religions. Baha’u’llah’s main

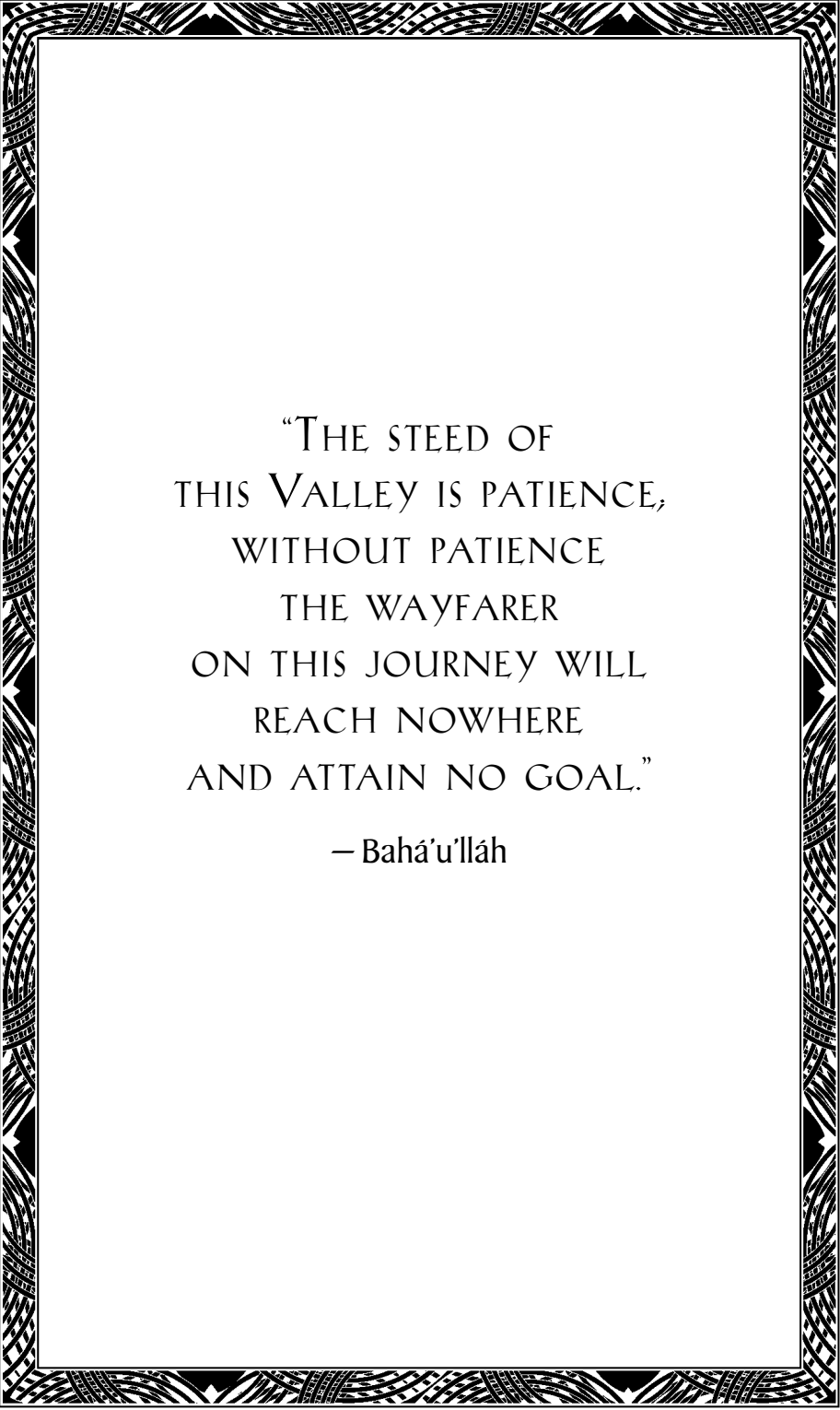
message was the Oneness of God, the Oneness of Religion, and the Oneness of Humanity. He taught that although God has been called by many different names all throughout history, His divine essence is the same as it has always been. He says, “This is the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future.” He further explained that the messengers that have been sent by God all brought messages for the specific needs of mankind in the day they were revealed and do not contradict the truth. Lastly, he taught that mankind originates from the same human family regardless of ethnicity, race, and geographical location.

The Bahá’í Faith is the youngest of the world’s independent religions and has spread all over the globe in less than 150 years. Since that time the Bahá’í Faith has become recognized as the fastest growing of today’s religions. With more than 5 million followers in at least 233 countries and dependent territories, it has become the second most widespread Faith, surpassing every other religion but Christianity in geographic reach. The Baha’is reside in more than 120,000 localities around the world — an expansion that reflects their dedication to the ideal of world citizenship and the unity of mankind.

The stories in this book reflect positive changes chosen by ordinary people in all walks of life. They each have taken extraordinary steps toward reaching a path that gives meaning and hope to the spiritual destiny that has been proclaimed by all of the prophets of the past.

Sit back, relax and experience forty-five spiritual journeys that are heart warming and inspirational to the soul.

Jonathan King



“THE STEED OF
THIS VALLEY IS PATIENCE,
WITHOUT PATIENCE
THE WAYFARER
ON THIS JOURNEY WILL
REACH NOWHERE
AND ATTAIN NO GOAL.”

— Bahá'u'lláh

THE MISSING WORD

Tricia Hague ❁ Blackford, New Zealand

T*ricia was born and raised in New Zealand. She became a Bahá'í in 1973 and, in time, overcame her addiction to alcohol.*

Things started to go wrong in my life. As a result, I began drinking heavily and got into all kinds of trouble. I was hurt, and I wanted my mother so badly. I became terribly depressed and turned to drinking as a panacea to solve my problems. I was in so much pain that I drank about four and a half bottles of bourbon a day. This put me in great danger because of the job I had delivering newspapers for about 3 hours a day. I would drive at a breakneck speed to finish the job so that I could go to my favorite hotel and drink alcohol in seclusion away from my kids. One day I had the kids in the car after drinking alcohol and I plowed through a flock of sheep, killing them and seriously denting the car. My children were in the back of the car, without seat belts. Thank God they survived.

I began to realize that I was unsafe to be with and needed someone to look after my kids. One night, I decided to find a babysitter to look after my kids so I could go and drink by myself. I picked up the newspaper and called a young girl who was in need of part time work. She was unable to do it, so, I got a friend of hers to baby-sit for me for the night. Then I went to get drunk. When I returned home later that night, I staggered into my living room and found eleven people

there waiting for me. They were all sitting with their legs crossed in the middle of the floor. The lady who was babysitting, named Annie, had asked if she could bring her husband around (they were newly married) and I had told her that she could do anything she liked. I offered everyone in the room some bourbon that I had brought back from the pub but they all said no, and declined my invitation to have a drink with me. I couldn't believe that was possible.

“Oh go on, have a drink,” I insisted. “Everyone should drink, it's the only way to get through this horrible existence.”

They still refused to drink with me.

When I asked them why they didn't drink, they said “Because we are —.”

I couldn't hear the last word. Being slightly deaf, I used to lip read a lot in order to hear what people were saying. I couldn't be bothered if they were not going to talk to me clearly. Anyway, I didn't make any further inquiries and they left.

What happened next was not expected. Immediately after the door clicked shut behind them, I became sober, and felt the sting had been taken out of the night. The next day, like all other days, I awoke to my bottle of bourbon beside my bed, and poured myself a drink. It didn't have any affect on me after I drank it. In fact, all week, no matter how much I drank, I could not get drunk. I was furious! By the time Saturday night rolled around again, I was ready for a binge. So I got the same woman to baby-sit for me again, and drove off to my favorite pub. However, as before, I could not get drunk. I thought about the woman in my house and wondered had they put a hex on me or something. All the fears of Satan taught to me by the church only made me more paranoid about my babysitter.

With that in mind I decided to go and confront her and her friends. I went home cold sober to confront this woman

and find out what the missing word was that she and her friends had mentioned the week before. There in my living room were the eleven people from the week before. I recognized them straight off. One was an American Indian. He wore the full native looking outfit, all except for the feather headdress. He had his hair plaited on both sides, with feathers and beads woven into the plait. Another man looked Chinese and was dressed in a suit. I cannot remember now what the others looked like, however, I did know that they came from all over the world.

I confronted them in a raging fit and asked them what was the missing word.

They asked, “What missing word?” I was extremely frustrated.

So, I explained. “Last week,” I explained through gritted teeth, “When I asked you to have a drink with me, you said that you didn’t drink, and that you were . . . What?” I asked again.

Annie’s husband said, “Bahá’í.”

“What’s that?” I asked.

When I found out it was a religion, I ordered them out of my house. I had had enough of religious freaks, and didn’t want to be browbeaten with more fear and dogmatic doctrines.

After they left with the click of the door, my life went back into a tailspin, falling fast into a vortex of pain and loneliness. I don’t remember much of the next two months. But what stood out was the court bailiff coming every day for more money for bills. My kids were screaming from lack of food, and I was at my wits end about what to do. Well, the depression was getting to me and I was still drinking heavily. One day while I was sitting in my living room with a drink in my hand, I thought to myself ‘nobody loves me.’ I was sure about that. As the tears ran down my

face, I mustered all of my strength and cried out, “God! If you’re really there, bring someone to me right now!” I thumped my clenched fist down onto the arm of the chair I was sitting in.

At that moment there was a knock at the front door. I was astounded. Thinking that it was a coincidence and just a pack of naughty kids on their way home from school, I went out to the door ready to give them a piece of my mind. However, when I opened the door I came face to face with Annie, my babysitter. Tears welled up and overflowed. I brought her inside and we talked about lots of things. I told her what was happening to me, and she listened. I have never been so grateful to anyone in my life. She talked about her religion, but not too much, and invited me to come to some meetings. Her advice to me was that I needed some new friends, ones that I could trust. I eventually did go along but I wasn’t at this stage interested in anything about her Faith. I only went to the meetings because I was attracted to this woman, who had shown me such love and attentiveness. I was impressed with her character. She was different from anyone I had ever met. There was something special about Annie. I looked at her and saw Christ-like qualities that had been missing in other people I had known. Yet I was still unaware of what made her tick. I was invited to a “fireside,” and for the life of me couldn’t figure out what that was. I said I would go, but after I had been to the pub that night. She assured me that it would be all right.

On my arrival at the house, I found only women there. Apparently all the men were babysitting the children for the mothers. Of course, I figured that this faith was a female religion, and perhaps they thought that God was a she. So with a combination of candles, heaters, red cushions, soft lighting, and finger food, I settled down in a corner to watch. This was not for me though. They all wanted to hear about

me, about my life, about my kids. Nobody had been that interested in me in years. What they did not know was that I didn't want to hear anything about this religion. I told them some things about myself but felt uncomfortable receiving so much attention. Of course, ultimately I had to stop talking and go home. But oddly enough, I enjoyed the night. However, I was scared of what they believed in. I was so sure it was witchcraft. The church had instilled into me a fear of such things.

A few days later, Annie came to see me once more and it was at a time when I needed her again. She said the Bahá'ís were going to put on a bit of a party and would I like to come? I said yes but was very reluctant to go. As before, I was confronted with soft lights, music, and someone talking about a person called "The Báb" and someone named "Bahá'u'lláh." The heaters were on, incense was burning, and there were beatnik types all over the place. Long hair for men was in, and so too were beards and beads. This was the first time I had met any of the Bahá'í men. At this stage in my life I had a favorite singing group that I loved called Seals and Crofts. At the time I did not know that they were Bahá'ís. My favorite song by Seals and Crofts was "Summer Breeze" and it was playing in the background. This was quite weird, actually, because whenever I walked into the pub I drank at, the band would stop what they were playing and start playing my song. Floor length dresses and beads were the in thing at the time. I was a bit of a hippie myself. This was 1973 and it was the age of the hippie, but this night I was not interested in clothing. I had come to the party tanked up with alcohol, and the combination of the hot room, soft lights, incense, and food made me rush from the room to throw up in the kitchen. How embarrassing! I had taken one look at the table full of scrumptious food, and up it all came. I missed the table but all of the booze spilled

around it. What a mess I was. I expected to be told off, but there was a lovely lady who tried to cover up my embarrassment and quickly showed me where the bathroom was. She cleaned up so nobody knew about it. The most amazing thing to me was that no one was upset. I pulled myself together and sat quietly in the lounge, listening to music. While sitting in that condition, one of the Bahá'ís leaned over and said to me, "There is only one God!" He said it quite softly too, and I opened my eyes and said, "I know that!" I closed my eyes for a while, then the same person leaned over and said, "There is only one religion." I said, "Yes, I know that, too." I was quite annoyed actually. He wasn't telling me anything I didn't already know. About ten minutes later, he leaned over and said, "There is only one race." I agreed with him and asked him to tell me something I didn't know. Nothing more was said, but I had heard something there that made me want to investigate further. I invited this man to my home the next night.

"Be at my home at seven-thirty tomorrow night," I told him as I was leaving, "And don't be late."

I gave him my address and that was the beginning of my independent search for the truth. This man was there the following night on the dot and I welcomed him in. We talked for hours about religion. I asked him all the questions that I had put to the churches, and he had the answers. Not only did he have the answers, but they were logical answers, too. I had heaps of questions that had baffled me about the Bible, and I needed them answered. It was sort of a hunger in me. I just had to know the answers. I knew in my heart that Christ had already returned, but couldn't pinpoint where. I already felt that this had happened, but nobody had been able to show me anything to prove my theory from the Church. Now here we were, me and this lone Bahá'í, and he was giving me all the proofs of Christ's second coming. The story was

profound. It touched my heart, captured my soul, and I couldn't help but question. For eleven nights, from seven thirty until four in the morning, this man answered my probing questions. The first question I had for him was "Do Bahá'ís pray for the dead?"

"Yes we do!" he replied. He opened his prayer book and showed me the prayer for the departed. I was thrilled. I tried to explain through my tears why I had asked. He was so understanding. He answered all the questions I had bottled up inside of myself. From then on I just asked questions. Out came the Bible and pamphlets and other books.

"Why did Christ say He was coming with a new name?"

"So that we would know that those who told us to look for Christ, here or there, would be leading us astray," he replied.

"He said He was going to come from Assyria, where did your Prophet come from?" Out came the maps, and there in the heart of Assyria was Tehran, Persia.

I asked more questions: "It is said that Elijah was to come first. Where is He and what was His name?" I knew his name would not be Elijah, simply because John the Baptist's name was not Elijah either, yet Christ had said He was Elijah.

"His name is The Báb," he replied.

"Christ will come by the way of the Gate. What does that mean?" I asked him.

"The Báb's name means "The Gate of God," just as Christ's new name will mean "The Glory of God.,"" he answered.

I felt it was time to make a decision. This man, Mac McLellan, and his wife, Barbara, were new pioneers to New Zealand and had not been there for a long period of time. Here I was, hungry and ready to be filled. After having had all the proofs shown to me over those wonderful eleven nights, I was thrilled to let go of the past, and reach out for

the new. I knew that I believed in Bahá'u'lláh. I knew that I also believed in Christ, in Muhammad, in Moses, in Buddha, and in Krishna. I recognized the same spirit in Abraham as was in Christ. I believed in the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. It all fitted together. Now I understood the concept of the “Return” and how it fitted into all the world’s religious prophecies.

After eleven nights of investigation, I awoke to a new day. When my Bahá'í friend brought my coat home from his house, I told him, “I would like to become a Bahá'í, am I allowed to?”

He just about flipped out. “Are you allowed to?” he yelled excitedly. He passed me an enrollment card, and I enrolled in the Bahá'í community immediately. I had found the spirit of Christ. I was not going to make Him wait for me any longer. It was the most mentally exciting day of my life. I thanked God that I had gotten out of the church when I did, and that I had found the answers to the many riddles in the Bible. I made a complete change around and found a new direction in my life.

I wanted to be clean again, and free to be able to serve God. I started to heal myself and to work on myself. I had made the choice to give up alcohol and drugs, and I was now on the right road. Shortly after joining the Faith, I was taken to the National Convention in Auckland. I found wonderful friends there, who gave their all for me. They showed me total kindness and they made me feel loved. I had no idea how to show my gratitude to the Bahá'ís for what they had done for me, for their strength in the Faith, and for bringing this healing message to me in my hour of need. It finally dawned on me after all those years of suffering that only Bahá'u'lláh's Message could raise humanity out of its misery. ❁

THE ANSWER

Robert Travell ❁ USA

Robert heard about the Bahá'í Faith in his hair salon from a Persian client who happened to be a Bahá'í. He became a Bahá'í in 1963 and currently resides in Modesto, California.

I came from a “broken home” and was raised by a wonderful mother who really did her best to see that we were loved and taken care of. But I was always acutely aware that the picture wasn't complete. In those days, to grow up in a broken home was stigma, something to be embarrassed about, and my sadness increased daily. Because I had no father around, I came to rely on my heavenly Father. My relationship with God became second nature, to the point that my friends thought it odd that I constantly made references to how wonderfully God took care of my family and me. I knew there was another dimension to reality, but couldn't explain it. I only knew that life as we saw it was not true reality, and that if I pondered enough, the answers would be given to me.

I was very popular and not at all rejected by my classmates. I was always sought out to be a part of this or that clique. Despite this, I never felt a part of any group, no matter how hard I tried. I was always on the outside looking in. Meanwhile, my sadness continued to tear a hole in my heart. I knew there was something else to life, but couldn't find anyone to give me answers. I went to my priest for answers and read books on other religions, but I didn't find

“The Answer” I was looking for. At the age of twelve, I decided I could not be Roman Catholic any longer. The racial hypocrisy was all too obvious to me, and I couldn’t see myself identifying with an institution that didn’t “practice what it preached.” I believed in God and Jesus, but that was it. I had to find out for myself what our Father really wanted for me.

At the age of 16 my life seemed so pointless. After graduating from high school I decided to get into military service. Instead of being assigned to “special services” as promised by the military recruitment officer, I was put in a traffic control school. I excelled and was at the top of my class. I was then sent to serve at one of the busiest bases in Germany. In Germany, I was very sad and lonely, and yet didn’t know why. I had friends, but nothing was what I felt it should be. My life became so unbearable I began contemplating suicide. I just couldn’t live with the pain. I decided that my only hope was God. I went to a church one day and began to pray. The only prayers I knew were the “Our Father” and the “Hail Mary.” For two hours or more I cried and said those two prayers with intermittent supplications for the filling of the “hole” in my heart. My heart felt like it was broken. As tears streamed down my face, I realized that God was not going to answer my prayers. I wiped my eyes and said out loud, “Well, God, I guess You’re not going to remove my pain. But you can’t make me lose my faith that easily! I still believe in You, and I still believe in Jesus, so there!” I wiped my eyes and departed the church. I decided to live with the pain as best as I could. After I was discharged from the military, I left Germany and returned to California to pursue a career in the hair dressing business. I decided to go into hairdressing, not because I had any talent in that direction, but because it was a field that would allow me to “book myself off” to go to auditions and style hair for actors

in theater. This was in 1958. For the next 5 years, I lived with this “broken heart” while I established myself in the business world. I survived by working long hours and drinking very heavily at night. My friends knew I was always sad, but I couldn’t tell them why.

At this juncture in my life, I had preconceived ideas of the “return of Christ.” I had even done an oil painting of the “last days.” But in reality, I didn’t dwell on those thoughts because it really wasn’t something I was waiting for, or living my life for. I just knew there was a God and there had to be a “Plan.”

One day I was working on a new client in my hair salon who happened to have a very fair complexion, with black hair and blue gray eyes. She spoke with an accent. I asked her if she was French. “No,” she said. “I’m Persian.” I said, “Oh, you must be a Moslem. I’ve never met a Moslem!” I was quite excited, as my love for God and religion had never faltered, even though I was so sad and drinking heavily. “No,” she said. “I’m a Bahá’í.” I asked, “What’s a Bahá’í?” She answered, “A Bahá’í is a follower of Bahá’u’lláh who we believe to be the return of Christ.” When she made that statement it felt like something actually punched me in the chest, right where the “hole of sadness” was. Instantly the pain and sadness were GONE! It was as if someone had physically punched me in the chest and knocked me over. I stopped what I was doing, and I excused myself. I then went to the back room and put my head against the wall and sobbed and sobbed as if I was expelling all the hurt in the world! What I was expecting to happen in St. Patrick’s Cathedral, happened in my beauty salon. If the answer to my prayer had come to me in St. Patrick’s Cathedral I would still be a Catholic today. I returned to my client, but didn’t dare tell her what had just occurred. I felt she would have thought me crazy. I put her under the dryer and tried to understand what miracle had just occurred from

hearing the name of Bahá'u'lláh! I got her out of the dryer and proceeded to finish my styling. Then I began to panic, thinking if I let her get away without finding out more about this miraculous name, I would have no way of searching it out because I didn't even know how to spell it. I cautiously asked her to tell me more expecting to get another punch. She replied, "My English is not so good, I will make another appointment and bring you a book."

Looking back on that day, I was a Bahá'í instantly because the name of the Blessed Beauty alone healed my broken heart. I knew it was the answer to my prayers and search. From that moment I never questioned the authenticity of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. After this woman—Nura Ioas—brought me more books and invited me to firesides, I immediately began to immerse myself in the healing waters of Bahá'u'lláh's Revelation! This was in 1963 and my spiritual mother, Nura Ioas, happened to be the niece of Hand of the Cause of God, Mr. Samandari. What a blessing was given to me! I thank God every day for this bounty, and still take time to call Nura periodically to express my thanks to her for bringing me the "healing" message of Bahá'u'lláh's revelation. ❁

ESCAPE FROM IRAN

Diane Andrea Mahboubi ❁ United Kingdom

Diane was first introduced to the Bahá'í Faith by her husband who happened to be a Persian Bahá'í. They were married in the early 1960s. It was not until after she lived in Iran and experienced the Iranian Revolution that she became a Bahá'í in 1979. She currently lives in Britain.

I first met Foad, my husband-to-be, in 1960 on the college steps in South Sea where I had dropped my books and he kindly helped me to pick them up. I didn't see him again until much later but I did remember this act of kindness.

We met on several occasions and he once invited me to a Bahá'í public meeting with a gentleman called John Ferraby who has since passed away, but who later made a lasting impact on my life with his book *All Things Made New*. He spoke at length, as most of the people who attended were Persians.

At the time I was quite young and joining a religion was the last thing on my mind. Even though I had been raised Catholic by my Norwegian Protestant mother, I had no interest in joining another religion. After finding employment with PanAm Airlines as an air hostess, Foad asked me to marry him as soon as he qualified to become a civil engineer. We married in 1965 at St. Andrew's church in South Sea, Hampshire, for a Christian ceremony, and afterwards at 27 Rutland Gate for the Bahá'í marriage ceremony. This

happened all on the same day and Foad's aunt Maryam arranged all of it.

I remember I enjoying my Bahá'í wedding but it didn't mean a great deal to me. All I can remember is dancing and eating lovely Persian cakes.

After living for eight months in cold, smoky old London, Foad and I agreed that there had to be a better place on earth to live. The next day Foad saw an ad for civil engineers in Zambia. He applied and got the job. Within a few weeks we were on a plane to Central Africa where we spent the next ten years in what seemed like paradise.

We lived in a beautiful town called Luanshya in the copper belt and met our first Bahá'í family there; Jessie and Eric Manton and their adopted daughter Mary. The Mantons ran a chicken farm and had no running water or electricity. They lived like the African people and I often wondered why. Eric was an electrician by trade, yet Mary and Jessie would walk down to the river each day to bathe and fetch water to boil for drinking and washing.

They had firesides for the Africans who would sit outside on potato sacks and listen to stories about Bahá'u'lláh. I was expecting my first baby at the time and will always remember the Manton's chicken farm. They gave Bahá'í books and free eggs to those who attended their firesides. I looked after Mary for them when they went to Uganda for the opening of the Bahá'í temple.

Foad never once ever tried to convert me to be a Bahá'í during all of the years we lived in Africa. Even after we moved to Zimbabwe, he continued to go to his 19-day feasts and I to the local church. We decided to let the children choose a religion for themselves and not force them to blindly accept our beliefs.

We came back to England a few times and bought a house, but continued to live in Africa. I was able to work as a secretary for my husband's firm and so this is how we lived. In 1976 we decided to take the children to visit their paternal grandparents for the first time in Iran. While visiting his parents, Foad was hired as one of the top engineers with a French/Iranian company. Over the next three years, we enjoyed our life in Iran. Things were going well for the country and we were glad to be there. However this soon turned into our worst nightmare. The Iranian revolution was unleashed in 1979.

When the Iranian revolution erupted, we were directly affected when fanatical protesters burned down the British Embassy School—where my son and daughter were enrolled as students. I well remember that day as very usual. When I arrived to pick up the children from school, I saw firebombs coming over the school wall. While all of this was going on, my children were nowhere to be seen. Unbeknownst to me, they had already been marched down to the British Embassy. Meanwhile, I was stuck there with the Iranian caretaker of the school grounds, absolutely terrified. It seemed revolutions were following me as I had just come from the end of the Zambian Freedom War and into the Rhodesian War. Now here I was in a land where I stuck out like a sore thumb. Because I was a foreigner and was not accustomed to wearing a headscarf, I had to face many angry crowds that screamed obscenities at me. Some people even threatened to harm me physically.

I knew the children were safe inside the embassy so I did not worry about them getting hurt. In order to ensure my own protection, the caretaker loaned me his wife's headscarf and helped me to escape by telling the crowd that I was an Iranian. Miraculously, they let me go through. It was a very difficult time as a curfew was enforced and I was unable to

shop alone. Most foreigners had been airlifted out of the country but because my children held dual nationalities, they refused to let them come with me. So I had no choice but to remain. We were becoming more and more worried as the schools began to shut down. Shops became empty, frequent shootings began, and one morning we awoke to hear a very eerie noise outside. We went up to the roof to see what the children thought were toilet rolls thrown up into the trees lining the streets. They were, in fact, bankrolls. Because of the propaganda being spread by the Mulla's at the time, the Iranians considered banks to be an evil institution created by the "devil imperialists" in America, Israel, and England. Apparently, they don't believe in charging interest on loans as is commonly practiced in the West!

The mobs burned down the hotels where foreigners resided and threw the furniture into the streets where it was trampled upon and destroyed by angry fanatics. Anything else that had to do with foreigners like clothing shops and supermarkets were also destroyed. People chanted "Death to the Shah" and "Death to America" all through the night until it became like a broken record. The crowds were also attacking foreigners or anyone connected with the Shah's regime at random. I was afraid to walk the street in fear that my life was at stake. It was a very strange time for us. Keeping the children at home all day trying to amuse them was challenging. Curfew was at 7 p.m. and anyone caught outside after the curfew could be shot. The airport was closed and we were virtually prisoners. All the other foreigners had been airlifted out. My Persian neighbors were very kind and brought us food in the Old Persian hospitable fashion. They were wonderful and kind to us, despite the fact that I was a foreigner. One of my worst moments during this period was when some fanatics with spray paint wrote graffiti all

over our house, which read in Farsi, “Dirty Bahá’ís Go to Israel.” Each morning when we washed it off, the fanatics would come back at night and spray it back on the house.

My mother-in-law decided that it was time for me to take the children out of Iran and let them attend school in the UK. So as soon as the airport opened again for Khomeini to return from France, we waited three days and nights at Mehrebad Airport until a flight arrived. We were able to escape without being arrested and arrived in London without any money. As the children and I came out of the airport, newspaper cameras were flashing at us and we were interviewed by the British press. My husband was supposed to follow us in three months after selling our home in Iran. That three months turned into six and a half years, because when he tried to leave, his passport was taken because he was a Bahá’í. I began to find schools for the children and settle in, but was unable to contact Foad as his calls were all monitored. He was eventually arrested for being a Bahá’í. But of course, no one at the Iranian Embassy in London would tell me this. When I went there to find out why they were keeping my husband virtually a prisoner and away from his family, I feared that I would never see him again as the months grew into years.

During all this time I became lonely, but fortunately found my neighbors to be very kind. We had nothing in common, since I had lived overseas for so long. I decided to contact the Bahá’ís to find out if there were any Iranians living near me. I wanted to find out why my husband’s religion caused him to be kept a prisoner in Iran. I was invited to a Naw-Ruz party that the children loved and they became friends with the other Bahá’í children. My daughter was then 11 and she told me she was going to be a Bahá’í.

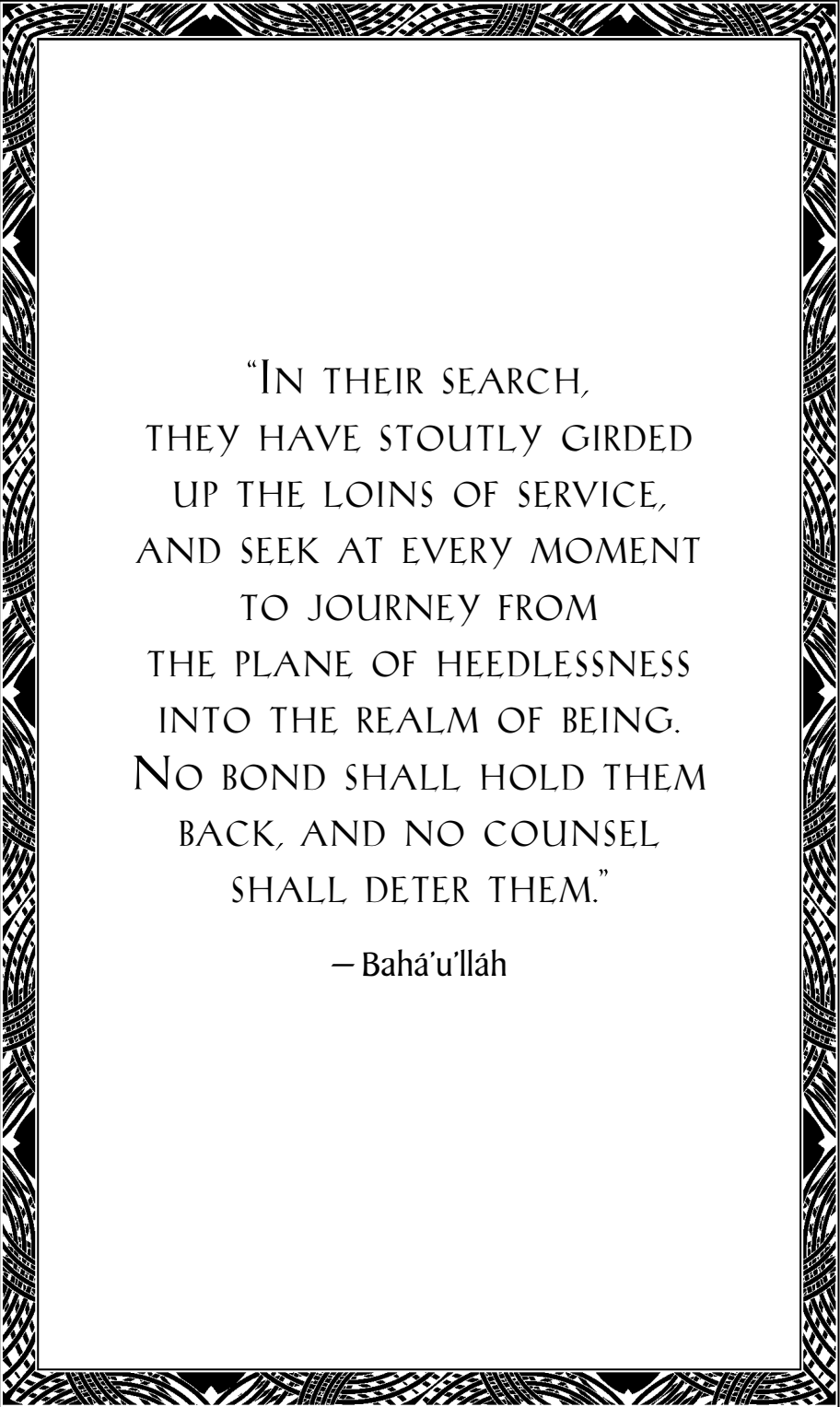
That did it! I decided to investigate after all this time and went to a couple firesides and read some Bahá’í books.

THE CHOSEN PATH

I first started reading *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, *All Things Made New* by John Ferraby and *Thief in the Night* by William Sears. I sat up until three in the morning with that book and my Bible looking up the various passages and by morning I couldn't wait to declare my new faith in Bahá'u'lláh. My only sorrow was that I was unable to tell my husband. He eventually found out after three months from his relatives who were pioneers in Saudi Arabia.

My one regret is that I had not searched earlier and declared before 1979. My husband escaped via Turkey in 1985. The day he arrived in Turkey, he phoned me to say he was in a place called Van. The Turkish Authorities were trying to decide whether to send him back to Iran or not. So I quickly wrote to Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, and asked permission for Foad to come to England without a passport to be with his wife and children. She responded very quickly and said "yes" he could enter into the country. The Home Secretary rang me to say his papers were being sent to Turkey. This took a further six weeks and I had to send him a ticket because all of his money had been confiscated.

It was a fabulous reunion and we were finally a family again. Since that time, I have been a Local Spiritual Assembly member in my community and served as its secretary. Foad and I are now grandparents and all of our children and their spouses and children are Bahá'ís. ❀



“IN THEIR SEARCH,
THEY HAVE STOUTLY GIRDED
UP THE LOINS OF SERVICE,
AND SEEK AT EVERY MOMENT
TO JOURNEY FROM
THE PLANE OF HEEDLESSNESS
INTO THE REALM OF BEING.
NO BOND SHALL HOLD THEM
BACK, AND NO COUNSEL
SHALL DETER THEM.”

— Bahá'u'lláh

I TOOK A NEW NAME

Carol Mullen ✿ USA

Carol was raised as a Seventh Day Adventist and later joined the Methodist Church with her husband. She initially heard about the Bahá'í Faith at an ecumenical gathering and declared in 1996. She currently resides in Alexandria, Minnesota.

I was the second youngest of 16 children, and raised by parents who were God-fearing Christians. We were instilled with a sense of pride, worked hard, and helped others. We lived in a rural community in central Minnesota, and our religious Faith was at the center of our everyday lives.

Prior to my birth, the Seventh Day Adventists moved into a little community church in the area. My father took our family to worship there. Some of my older siblings were baptized in that church. My father found some doctrine based on Daniel, which he disagreed with. As a result he discontinued attending that church. From that time on, there has been conflict in my family about religion. Seven of my sisters became Adventists, much to my father's displeasure. Religion had started as a focal point to draw my family together, and unfortunately led to a split that took us in different directions.

As I grew up, I picked up the "don'ts" of religion, but I didn't agree with all of the prohibitions. Personally, I didn't think it would hurt to wear jewelry, or go to the movies, or play cards. When I was 12 years old, I asked my mother if she would get me my own Bible. I decided I was going to read the

Bible from cover to cover. But when I started reading all the “begets” and strange names I had never heard before, it was too hard for me to understand. So I got discouraged and stopped reading the Bible. Nonetheless, I still had a deep thirst to know more about God and religion.

I left home after graduation and married Eugene Mullen. After visiting churches of different denominations, we joined the Methodist Church. We raised three children as active members of our new church and were very involved in church activities. It was a good place to continue my search. I participated in the Consultation on Church Union. I was always very interested in anything that would bring people together. I did discover that God was love and He loves us all. Yet, I saw that many divisions remained among all of the Christian denominations, and prevented them from bonding together in the common cause of Christ.

At an ecumenical group meeting, I met Gail Akhavan, who happened to be a Bahá'í. It was the first time I had ever heard the word Bahá'í. After that, when we would travel around the country, I would try to find the Bahá'í Faith in the phone book. I was hoping we could visit a Bahá'í church but never got a chance to.

Some years later our Sunday school class was studying world religions. On one of the Sundays a local Bahá'í couple, Julie and Michael Corkill-Bomgaars, came and shared stories with us about the Bahá'í Faith. The Akhavans and the Corkill-Bomgaars were the only two Bahá'í families in our area. We had many dinners at the Akhavan home. Dr. Traz and Gail were really good about sharing the Faith. Stephen and Nadjla Birkland were there one night and we had a very nice discussion. Stephen asked if I would like to become a Bahá'í. Nadjla asked my husband, Gene, how he felt about that and Gene replied “He hasn't led me down a wrong road yet!” Steven and Nadjla gave me several declaration cards and I took the cards home with me. However, I did not sign the card right away.

I felt I needed to see what a group of Bahá'ís were like. So I journeyed off to a Bahá'í Summer School by myself. Mr. William Sears was the featured speaker at that summer school. During my time there, I met Mr. Sears' wife, Marguerite Sears. It was indeed a privilege that I didn't fully realize at that time. I was even in a little study group with her. Mrs. Sears made a BIG impression on me. I later came to feel very close to Mr. Sears through reading his many books.

At that summer school the Most Holy Book—the Kitáb-i-Aqdas—was newly out in hard copy. Buying a copy offered more questions. I still had some more hurdles to climb over as I was reading that! But, I had many more new friends. Two very special people, Ehsan and Rizvan Tebyanifard, came into our life. They made their home our home and taught us about the Faith. They eventually became a great support to our whole family. By sharing their story of escape from Iran during the revolution, they gave us a vivid picture of the suffering of the early Bahá'ís and the many hardships they went through.

In September 1996 my daughter Patsy and I went off to the Green Lake Bahá'í Conference. I purchased many tapes and more books. I felt like a sponge wanting to absorb all the information that I could. I felt like I was in a desert, dying of thirst, and that what I was learning was like a river flowing through an oasis.

From the time I learned of the Bahá'í Faith until to my declaration, I slowly started sharing the Bahá'í writings with my family. I left books about the Faith around the house so they could read about it. Over time, we had many family discussions about the writings. By that time our kids were adults and were really open to the Faith. I didn't realize it but we were all growing together.

In our church, we had a very open Sunday school class. I was asked to share the tape “Who are Bahá'ís” even though I was not yet a Bahá'í. The tape was about 20 minutes long and

the rest of the hour we had a discussion about it. Several people in the class had many questions about the Faith; a number of seeds were planted from that discussion.

At this point, there was no turning back. I decided to become a Bahá'í but had to write my church and tell them about my fateful decision. On October 29, 1996, I wrote a letter to my church and forwarded it to my pastor. It read as follows:

To Alexandria United Methodist Church:

I have been a part of this church for 42+ years, the only church I have held membership. As a child, I had a deep thirst for finding God. I found this church a place where I could search freely. I have been a part of many classes, Bible studies, Sunday school, and whatever was offered. I loved our openness to other Faiths . . . in that we also used reason & experience along with the Bible and tradition. In a past Sunday School Class we were studying the "Growing Christian Series on World Religions." One member of our class, Connie Good, brought her neighbors to share their faith. They are Bahá'í. I picked up a book they had shared, "Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era." As I studied, I began to recognize the many messengers of God and understand the significance of progressive revelation. Bahá'u'lláh, the newest messenger of God, brings the message of Unity, fulfilling many of Jesus' prophecies. It answered many of the questions we were struggling with in class. I have been investigating the Bahá'í Faith since that Sunday School Class and have decided to become a Bahá'í.

When I left my family to marry Gene, I took a new name. I am still part of them and they are a part of me, just as you will always be a part of me, as I become a Bahá'í. Now my spiritual family has been enlarged. It includes all of humankind. God is one, humankind is one and the religions agree.

In God's love,

Carol Mullen

THE CHOSEN PATH

Upon receiving my letter at the church, Rev. Gaughan called and said he was happy for me. He said he knew I had been struggling with the decision, as I had told him earlier that I was a Bahá'í at heart. He asked me if I would like to have my letter put in our Weekly Messenger, since it was addressed to the church. My heart sang with joy, because I knew that it would enable many more seeds to become planted.

On November 4, 1996, I sat down in the quiet of my home and signed my declaration card, declaring my faith in Bahá'u'lláh. I felt so honored to have recognized Bahá'u'lláh. As I continued to read the Bahá'í writings, my thirst for knowledge was quenched even more.

We started having firesides at our house every other week on Friday nights. Bahá'ís traveled many miles to join us. In January 1997 our son-in-law, Ryan Hovey, became the next Bahá'í in our family, to be followed by his wife, Lori (our youngest daughter), and their two little daughters, Alida and Taharah. Then in March our daughter Patsy Waggoner became a Bahá'í. One year of after my declaration, my husband Gene became a Bahá'í. Two years later, our son Michael and his wife and daughter, and Tila Mullen (our eldest granddaughter) became Bahá'ís too. Through the years, I have become more and more enamored over the idea that my humble declaration as a Bahá'í has led to “A Mini Entry by Troops” in my own family. ♣

I MUST BE A BAHÁ'Í

Reginald Newkirk ❁ Canada

Born in Brooklyn, New York, Reggie accepted the Bahá'í Faith on September 24th, 1962 in Denver, Colorado. He currently resides in Saskatchewan, Canada. He has served as a member of the Auxiliary Board and as a member of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Canada.

I was born and raised in the Bedford Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn, New York. The head of my family, my grandmother, owned and operated a beauty parlor. For most of my early childhood my mother, sisters and I lived with my grandmother. I learned about hard work, dedication and sacrifice very early in my life simply by observing the long hours my mother worked. My grandmother had a six-day workweek in her beauty parlor. My mother worked in both the garment industry and her mother's shop. In twenty-five years I cannot remember my grandmother once taking a vacation. Love, encouragement, support and helpful advice were a constant in my immediate and extended family. Many of my first impressions of life, philosophy, values, religion and relationships were gleaned from loud, impassioned and often humorous dialogue coming from beneath hair dryers.

Yet, notwithstanding the values I was taught, during my early teenage years I became one of the leaders of a street gang in my neighborhood. At first the adventure, status and power filled me with a feeling of invincibility. The turning point came

suddenly during a gang fight when a member of the opposing gang whose throat was cut, stumbled into the subway car I was in. Seeing him profusely bleeding from his neck, I realized that he was not an enemy, but a brother who needed my help. I applied pressure to his neck that slowed the bleeding until emergency personnel boarded the subway at the next stop. My efforts saved his life and, at the same time, a white lady who vouched for me, that I was not the perpetrator of the throat cutting, saved me from being arrested by the police.

In 1961, I graduated from high school, with college out of my reach financially. With the United States embroiled in the Vietnam War I tried to find a way to escape the draft by enlisting in the Air Force rather than the Army. I reasoned that I would not be sent to Vietnam and I would learn a trade. My induction date was about a month away when one night I dreamed I saw myself in jail. I felt the dream's message was telling me that I had to get out of Brooklyn sooner. I returned to the recruiters and moved my induction date from August 4 to July 23rd.

During basic training at Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas, I learned from my mother that police had come to the door of my mom's house looking for me because they had received a complaint that I had been disturbing the peace at a time when I was already in Texas. With the power of hindsight I recognize points in my life where a force much greater and wiser than me was at work in my destiny.

After basic training I was assigned to the Strategic Air Command's Combat Defense Force and stationed at Lowry Air Force Base in Denver, Colorado. One day I went for a meal with a good friend, Archie Evans. He was from Harlem. After moving through the food line, we went to a vacant table to eat. Out of the blue Archie told me, in a loud and rather dramatic voice, that he had made a discovery that day and if it was true it was the most wonderful thing to ever happen to humanity! In an even louder voice he announced, "I've discovered that

Christ has returned!” My first reaction to his comment was laughter. I thought he had simply lost his mind. Then I noticed that the Mess Hall had become extremely quiet. People looked over at us, trying to act as if they did not hear anything. Despite me ridiculing Archie about his newfound religious experience, Archie kept his cool. He didn’t show the least sign of irritation at my response.

Once I was able to pull myself together, I told him that while I was not a scholar of the Bible, I had read enough of it to know that when Christ returned to earth it would signal the end of the world. I had been taught in Sunday school that the dead would arise from their graves upon Christ’s return. I had seen no conspicuous signs of the return of Christ. Yet somehow, before we finished our meal, Archie managed to introduce me to the idea that Bahá’u’lláh —an amazing person whose name I could not pronounce—was making an amazing claim that I was unable to summarily dismiss without investigation. I asked Archie for more information about this new religion. A few days later, he handed me a small introductory pamphlet, *Faith for Freedom*. My attraction to the principles was immediate, along with my intention to look into this further and find why it was a hoax. A while later, I was given a book called *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh* but found the language too poetic for my taste and therefore too difficult to understand. I asked for another book to read, and at the same time, indicated to Archie that I would like to meet a member of this religion to begin the debate. Archie told me I was not ready to meet a Bahá’í. I did not have to ask him what he meant, I intuitively understood that Archie knew I was not ready to socialize with or be taught anything from someone white. He also realized that I needed to do more reading, so he gave me two more books. One was *Thief in the Night* by William Sears and the other was *Kitáb-i-Íqán (The Book of Certitude)* by Bahá’u’lláh. I read *Thief in the Night* once and checked each biblical footnote twice. I struggled through the

Book of Certitude and got more out of it than I realized. When I finished reading those two books, finally Archie arranged for me to meet the Bahá'ís he had been talking to!

To my disappointment, the Bahá'í that Archie introduced me to was a white man. Although, the Bahá'í, Lynn King, greeted me warmly and invited me for dinner at his house and to stay over for the weekend, my suspicions were aroused. Guardedly I accepted his invitation because Bahá'u'lláh's grip on me was stronger than my fears and suspicion.

Lynn picked me up at my barracks and on the ride from the Lowry air base to his home he talked about his work, his life and his family. As well as asked me questions about my life. I felt myself relaxing and warming up a little towards this down to earth guy. At the door, when I was greeted by Laretta, his wife, and their children, the last of my reticence began to melt rapidly. The evening unfolded memorably with great food, stimulating conversation and a wonderful feeling of acceptance that I had seldom experienced beyond my own family and neighborhood friends. I learned that Laretta was of American Indian heritage, Tlingit of Alaska, and remember thinking that any white guy married to an Indian woman can't be all that bad.

I sat in their living room and asked questions about religion in general and the Bahá'í Faith in particular. The conversation was animated, exploratory, insightful, and wide-ranging. Although we talked until 4 o'clock in the morning, I did not feel tired—just excited. As the weekend progressed I got more and more answers to my questions. Saturday was another “late-nighter”, and we continued the conversation and study of different religions all day Sunday. After dinner I had returned to the base. I continued to study the Faith with Lynn and other Bahá'ís, attending a number of firesides from June through the end of September. During those months, Lynn, Laretta, and I became very close friends. Their loving kindness,

honest and direct approach, and their sensitivity all helped me deal with a number of my personal prejudices toward white people.

I was then quite convinced with the teachings but yet still had one question that remained unanswered that I put to Lynn one day. I asked him: “How do you really know Bahá’u’lláh is who he said he was?” Lynn told me that I should get down on my knees and pray hard, begging God for a sign of proof. So I prayed and waited. Sometime later, there was a talk being given at a fireside I attended with Lynn by Julie Sater on progressive revelation. I went to hear the talk thinking that I had heard all there was to hear about the topic. As the talk progressed, I felt an unusual presence in the room. All of a sudden, I felt as if all the people in the room were one and all were drawn together with a profound feeling of love and warmth. I turned to Lynn and asked him—for the first time—how do you become a Bahá’í? Lynn immediately handed me a blue declaration card and a pen. He said all you have to do is sign this card. I handed it back to him. I just wanted to know what one had to do. I continued to listen to Mrs. Sater. The feeling that we all were surrounded by a loving presence grew more intense. Each one of us felt it. For me it was like an ink blotter absorbing all of my hurts, worries, suspicions, and doubts. It gave my soul a fresh start. This rebirth was a truly liberating feeling. In that moment, I saw no contradiction between Christ and Bahá’u’lláh.

As she was wrapping up her presentation, a number of things Mrs. Sater said affected me as though a light bulb had been turned on in my head. These were profound yet simple truths. Suddenly I felt as though an invisible force was driving me from within and I could not resist it. That force impelled me to stand up. Through my tears I said, “I must be a Bahá’í!” Out came the blue card and pen from Lynn. From that moment on, I have worked to spread the good news about Bahá’u’lláh, the hope of humanity, and His wonderful, life-giving, soul-inspiring teachings. ❀

THE HERETIC

Yusef Tarwala ❁ India

R*aised in India, Yusef became a Bahá'í when he was 15 years old. He has pioneered in Southeast Asia and is currently living as a homefront pioneer in Australia.*

I came from a rather elite community of Muslims in India known as the Vohra. They are Shi'ite Muslims who converted from Hinduism to Islam over the last two hundred years. They live in conclaves known as “colonies” in Mumbai, Nashik, and several cities in the Gujarat State to the north of Mumbai. A Bahá'í known as Fakrudin Motiwala, who came from a Vohra background, was brought into the Faith by Mrs. Shirin Fozdar. He eventually returned to Nashik from Mumbai in the mid-1950s as a homefront pioneer. He settled in a Vohra colony. Everyone was informed that he was a kafir (evil person), because he changed his Faith from Islam to Bahá'í. To the Muslims, he was a heretic for giving up his Faith. At the time, I was only thirteen years old and had been told that this man was very evil and that we children should stay away from him. One day while I was walking home from school with a friend, I was tempted to see what a kafir looked like. So my friends and I decided to sneak into his backyard. After entering his backyard, we found some white hens in pens against the fence. We stood around and watched the hens for a few minutes not knowing if we would see the evil man or not. I sensed that someone was watching us. Suddenly, we heard a noise and turned around to see a tall, imposing figure looking down at

us. My friend was so frightened he instinctively ran out of the garden, but I was too curious to run away. I hesitated for a moment and Mr. Motiwala—the one deemed as the evil one—called me with such friendliness and charity that I decided to approach him. He invited me into his house, and asked whose son I was. He poured me a refreshing drink and treated me like a grown-up. He treated me with such dignity and respect that I decided to return several times on my way home from school.

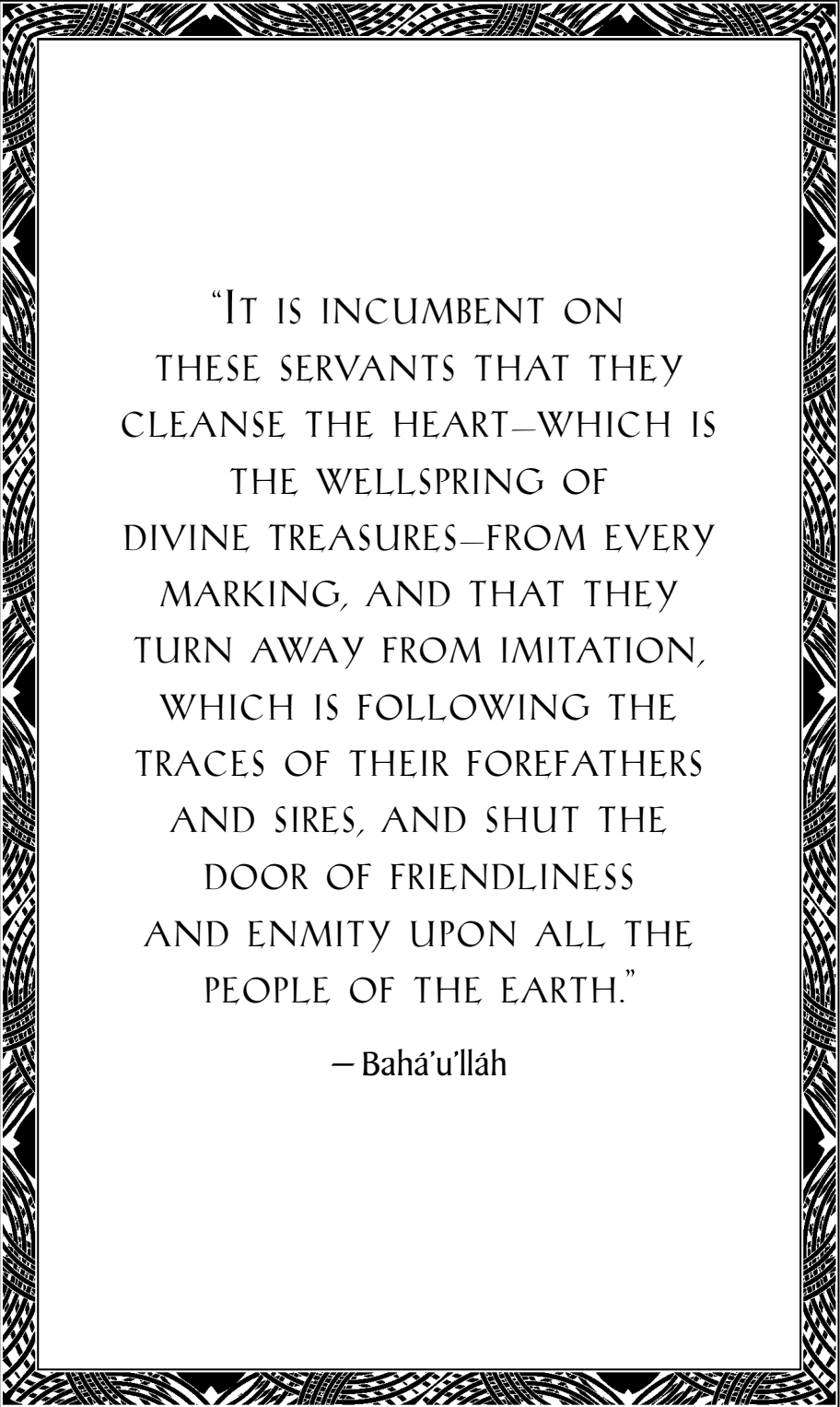
I soon mustered up enough courage to ask him why he became a kafir because kafirs do bad things and live immoral lives. Mr. Motiwala asked me whether I had ever seen him living a bad life such as drinking alcohol and smoking. I told him that I had not witnessed such behavior. At that point, this man known as the “Evil One” gradually introduced me to the teachings of the Faith. I visited Mr. Motiwala’s house frequently and often witnessed the cruelty of the Mullas against him. I was better able to judge that he was in reality a very righteous man.

I continued to attend religious school every Saturday at the mosque. One day a Mulla asked me a question and I repeated an answer from one of the Bahá’í books I had borrowed from Mr. Motiwala. The Mulla asked me where I received this information and I told him from the *Kitáb-i-Íqán* (the Book of Certitude). The young Mulla asked if he could see the book so I went to Mr. Motiwala’s house to obtain the book. After some time, the Mulla came urgently to my house and asked if my mother, Asma, could take him to Mr. Motiwala’s house. In those days, it was a courtesy to work through third parties when being introduced to someone for the first time. When my mother escorted the Mulla to Mr. Motiwala’s house, the Mulla exclaimed to Mr. Motiwala that this book—*The Kitáb-i-Íqán*—was not written by an ordinary man. His heart was closely touched by Bahá’u’lláh’s revelation and he hurriedly but unwisely went to express his fascination about the book to the Chief Mulla. After telling the Chief Mulla what he thought

about the book, the young Mulla and his wife—who happened to be pregnant—were issued an order to vacate the mosque within twenty-four hours.

In a state of despair, the young Mulla contacted Mr. Motiwala and implored him to give him money to get to Bombay because he had no source of income. Mr. Motiwala and my mother were able to come up with enough money to help the poor Mulla take the train to Bombay. He was never heard of again. When I turned fifteen, I declared my faith in Bahá'u'lláh. After four years of earnest teaching in Nashik among the Vohra and other local people, Mr. Motiwala was still the subject of a lot of scorn from the people there despite the virtuous life that he lived.

Mr. Motiwala still lives in Nashik, and has planted many seeds. He firmly believes that at the time of entry by troops, the Vohra community will be in the forefront. After some time, I eventually pioneered during the Nine Year Plan to Southeast Asia and presently homefront pioneer in the Northern Territory of Australia. ❁



“IT IS INCUMBENT ON
THESE SERVANTS THAT THEY
CLEANSE THE HEART—WHICH IS
THE WELLSPRING OF
DIVINE TREASURES—FROM EVERY
MARKING, AND THAT THEY
TURN AWAY FROM IMITATION,
WHICH IS FOLLOWING THE
TRACES OF THEIR FOREFATHERS
AND SIRES, AND SHUT THE
DOOR OF FRIENDLINESS
AND ENMITY UPON ALL THE
PEOPLE OF THE EARTH.”

— Bahá'u'lláh

IF GOD WERE SO LOVING...

Agatha Gaisie Nketisiah ❁ Ghana

*A*gatha was born and raised in Ghana. She graduated from Clark-Atlanta University in Atlanta, Georgia, and is currently the Director of the Information Technology Division in the Ministry of Finance of Ghana.

I attended a boarding school during my time in high school. While I was a student there, we had a club called the Scripture Union—a Christian club that was very fanatical. My parents were Christians, my but father’s parents were Moslems. They were very loving people. However, I never understood how my Christian friends could condemn all Moslems and any other non-Christian people to hell. Unfortunately during these Scripture Union meetings in our boarding school, we were always told how everyone was going to hell apart from Christians.

I was a very active member of the club and believed in God and Jesus Christ in a very dogmatic way. Nonetheless, the one thing that always bothered me was if God was so Loving, Merciful, Kind, Good, and Perfect, how could He only allow Christians—who form a small percentage of the world’s population—to go to heaven and condemn everyone else, including my loving grandparents, to eternal damnation. I really needed an answer to this but did not dare ask this question because in Scripture you do not question the Bible. You just have to have faith in the word.

From high school I went to the university and still

remained a member of the Scripture Union. One day, sometime in January of 1975, I went to visit two female friends who were sharing a room in University Hostel. No sooner had I arrived than a friend of theirs entered the room. As soon as he entered, my friends shouted, “Hey Morgan, we are tired of hearing about the Bahá’í Faith. We do not want to hear anything else about it. Please go out and leave us in peace.” I felt so bad for Morgan that I said “Morgan, if they do not want to listen to you, please come and talk to me. I will listen.” I had not heard the word Bahá’í before and little did I know that it was about religion. So Morgan started talking about progressive revelation and the principles and teachings of the Bahá’í Faith. I was stunned over what I heard, especially about progressive revelation. It was as if it was an answer to my long awaited question. So I said, “So does it mean that if you are a Moslem, you won’t go to hell?” He said, “Yes.” He explained the concept of heaven and hell being a state of existence and not a physical place. Immediately I asked about how one could become a Bahá’í. I then hesitated and said, “Well, I will have to think about it a little first.” Morgan talked for about two hours. My friends realizing my keen interest in the Faith, left me with Morgan in their room. They told me they would collect their key from the room later on.

Soon after, I started attending Bahá’í meetings. Meanwhile I had a friend who was dating me at the time. Though I knew he was not a Christian he never disclosed his religion to me. I always believed I could make him a Christian. I was still going to my Christian meetings and he would follow me, sit quietly and listen to all that went on. I had already explained to him that because I was a born-again Christian, we could only stay together as platonic friends until we got married. He never asked me to do anything immoral with him. I was amazed at his good manners and behavior. I had wanted to tell him about the Bahá’í Faith but decided against it. I was still turning things over in my mind.

One day Morgan came to tell me to go with him to a Bahá'í feast. I accepted and went with him and promised to declare at the meeting. I wanted to hide it from my friend who was dating me so I told him I had an appointment and that he could not see me that evening. No sooner had we gotten to the meeting than I saw him sitting in the room with the other Bahá'ís. I was a little bit upset. I said to myself, "Why can't this man leave me alone? How did he know that I was coming to this place?" I was sure he was trailing me. After the spiritual part of the meeting, Morgan told me that he had to take me out since I could not take part in the administrative part. I was therefore expecting that my friend who was dating me would also leave the room. He did not follow me out of the room so I turned around and said, "Why is Mr. Nketisiah also not going with me?" All the people in the room looked at me with a surprised look on their faces. One responded, "Mr. Nketisiah is not leaving because he is a Bahá'í. It is only non-Bahá'ís who have to go out." I was absolutely shocked. Then I told myself, this Faith must be a very good one. During the social part, I declared as a Bahá'í. It was on the 5th or 6th of February, 1975.

It was the teachings of progressive revelation and my husband's life that influenced me to become a Bahá'í. I eventually married the man I was dating at the time. We are happily married with four children. ❁

A LETTER TO GOD

Kyle Whitfield ❁ Canada

Kyle lives in Guelph, Ontario, and works as a Research Associate for the Murray Alzheimer Research and Education Program out of the University of Waterloo. She is currently completing a Ph.D. in planning.

In 1986 after graduating from high school, I went to Israel for one year to work on a Kibbutz and participate in an archeological excavation. The real purpose of this trip was very spiritual in nature, however. I was looking for God and a religion. I knew this was the need of my spirit at the time. During my year, I spent time with the Orthodox Jews and Christians and some Muslims, trying to understand what their religion was all about with the hope of maybe joining one of them. I was looking for the true religion.

At the end of my year, I spent a few weeks traveling around Israel and therefore went to Haifa. In the hostel I was staying, there was a posting on a board inviting people for a tour of a Bahá'í holy shrine on Mt. Carmel. Some of the other travelers wanted to go on the tour, so I went too. I was very impressed with the Bahá'í gardens but when I entered the shrine of the Báb, I was, unfortunately, unaffected. I didn't understand those who had knelt down at the altar, or the candlesticks behind the sheer curtain. It was confusing to me—what was this place? It was different from other mosques or religious places I had been to. I took the pamphlet about the Bahá'í Faith and then left.

A few days later, I went down to the water in Haifa, rolled up the pant legs of my jeans, took out my journal, and wrote a letter to God. “I have been looking for you for this whole year and have not found you. I have looked everywhere but you are nowhere to be found. I am giving up—that’s it!” There I sat, at the bottom of Mt. Carmel, at the foot of the most holy place in this world discouraged and feeling left alone.

While still in Haifa, I asked an Israeli gentleman where I should visit and he told me I had to visit some wonderful gardens in Bahji. “Oh, I’ve seen tons of flowers before,” I told myself. Little did I know the significance of this place he was referring to. When I was leaving on the plane to go home and flying out of the Tel Aviv airport, I recall feeling sorry that I didn’t get to those gardens. “Oh well,” I sighed, “Maybe another time.”

When I returned home to Ontario, I began my first year of university. During the first week, the various university clubs had booths set up in the main university center. I came across the Bahá’í booth and saw many photos of the place I had just returned from. Photos of the Bahá’í World Center were on several pamphlets and other books laid out on the table. “I’ve been there,” I told the Bahá’í. “In fact, I just got back from there.” His mouth dropped open and he gasped, “Do you know what that place is? Do you know the significance of that place?” “Not really,” I shrugged, “Nice gardens, though.”

I ended up attending the Association for Bahá’í Studies weekly meetings, not with an aim to join the Faith but, unfortunately, with an aim to prove their beliefs wrong in some way. In reflecting on this now, I know this was very much due to my feeling that God had left me very much alone. Of course, these people were the nicest I had ever met and when I presented questions to them that they didn’t

know the answers to, they said things like “Let’s find out together.” Well, I loved this approach. The Bahá’ís would then invite me out for pizza afterwards and they eventually became my dear friends. After attending several meetings and getting to know more and more Bahá’ís, I decided I, too, wanted to be part of this most great Cause. It spoke of everything I believed in, yet, I had to reestablish my relationship with God. Naturally, there was much struggle with this, as most tests are. However, over time, this connection became strengthened. In 1988, I became a Bahá’í.

In 1995, I had the honor of going on pilgrimage. Back to the Mountain of Carmel, back where it all began for me. It was a profound experience. On the first day of pilgrimage, all the pilgrims walked toward the Shrine of the Báb. I looked up at that golden dome, and knew that seven years before, I had walked in this same place, yet could not see or feel its reality. I crumbled and could barely walk any further. I felt so absolutely sorry that my heart, those years ago, could not be penetrated by the power of this Mighty Cause. After tremendous reassurance and time, I tried to continue on the walk toward this most holy place, now alone. Kneeling at the altar in the Shrine of the Báb, I offered up my soul, and asked that it now be placed in trusting hands as I could no longer take on the responsibility of the destiny of my own spirit. In essence, this is why I became a Bahá’í. I came to know that it was not up to me to control my spirit and that some much greater force was guiding me. ♣

THE QUEEN OF CARMEL

Lois Kulecho ❁ Kenya

Lois is a retired teacher who was born in Kenya and spent several years working as a civil servant. She became a Bahá'í in 1962 and later spent one year studying in Israel. She attended the opening of the Terraces in Haifa in 2001.

I was born in the western part of Kenya in a village called Tombo. I was the last born in a family of eight children. My mother's maiden name was Rebecca Muronji and my father's name was Kefa Sikume. My parents were Christians and made sure that I got a Christian education. I was enrolled in a Quaker school in my formative years and eventually completed my education in Loreto Limuru High School, which is considered one of the best Catholic schools in Kenya. I graduated in 1956. At the time, education for girls was not highly valued, and it was a privilege for a girl to even go to high school. I became the first girl in my district to enter a secondary school and graduate. After graduating from high school, I entered a Teacher training college called Siriba in 1957 and later became a tutor at Chardwick College.

At this point in time, I was engaged to a young man who had gone to study in the United States. We had plans to get married after he returned from studying in California but my life took a turn that I was not expecting. Before my fiancé returned, I happened to meet a man by the name of Isaiah Kulecho, who was the administrative chief of his village in

Kabras. As soon as he laid eyes on me, he made plans to marry me. I was not expecting this to happen but my father gave a quick consent because this man was rich. He made plans to pay my father 19 cows, which was quite a hefty dowry at that time. On average, a big dowry given to a virgin girl was 7 cows. So 19 was quite unbelievable!

I soon became the Chief's beloved wife and started having children immediately. Previously, my husband had been married and his first wife had only bore daughters. Giving birth to 6 sons made him quite happy. Despite not knowing much about him before we got married, we enjoyed a happy marriage together and had many children. We eventually had six boys and three girls. At the time, my husband was a Quaker and I was a Christian.

In the late 50s, some Bahá'í pioneers, including Mr. Ali Nakhjavani and his wife, happened to come by our house and teach us the Faith. We were very open minded about studying other religions but it was hard for me to declare my belief in the Faith because the Bahá'ís said that Bahá'u'lláh was the return of Christ. Although I liked the teachings, I just couldn't believe such a claim. At that time, many Bahá'í teachers were coming to Africa and I was lucky to have met Amat'ul-Bahá Rúhíyyih Khánúm, Mr. Enoch Olinga, Aziz Yazdi, and Mr. Musa Banani. What I found in common in them was that they never showed any superiority in their dealings with me. They were all happy, humble, and kind. What I found from meeting with the Bahá'ís was that the little books they left for me to read were very interesting and their prayers were very touching. I knew instinctively that the Bahá'í Faith was different from other religions and felt that it was the right religion for me. In 1962 I decided to become a Bahá'í.

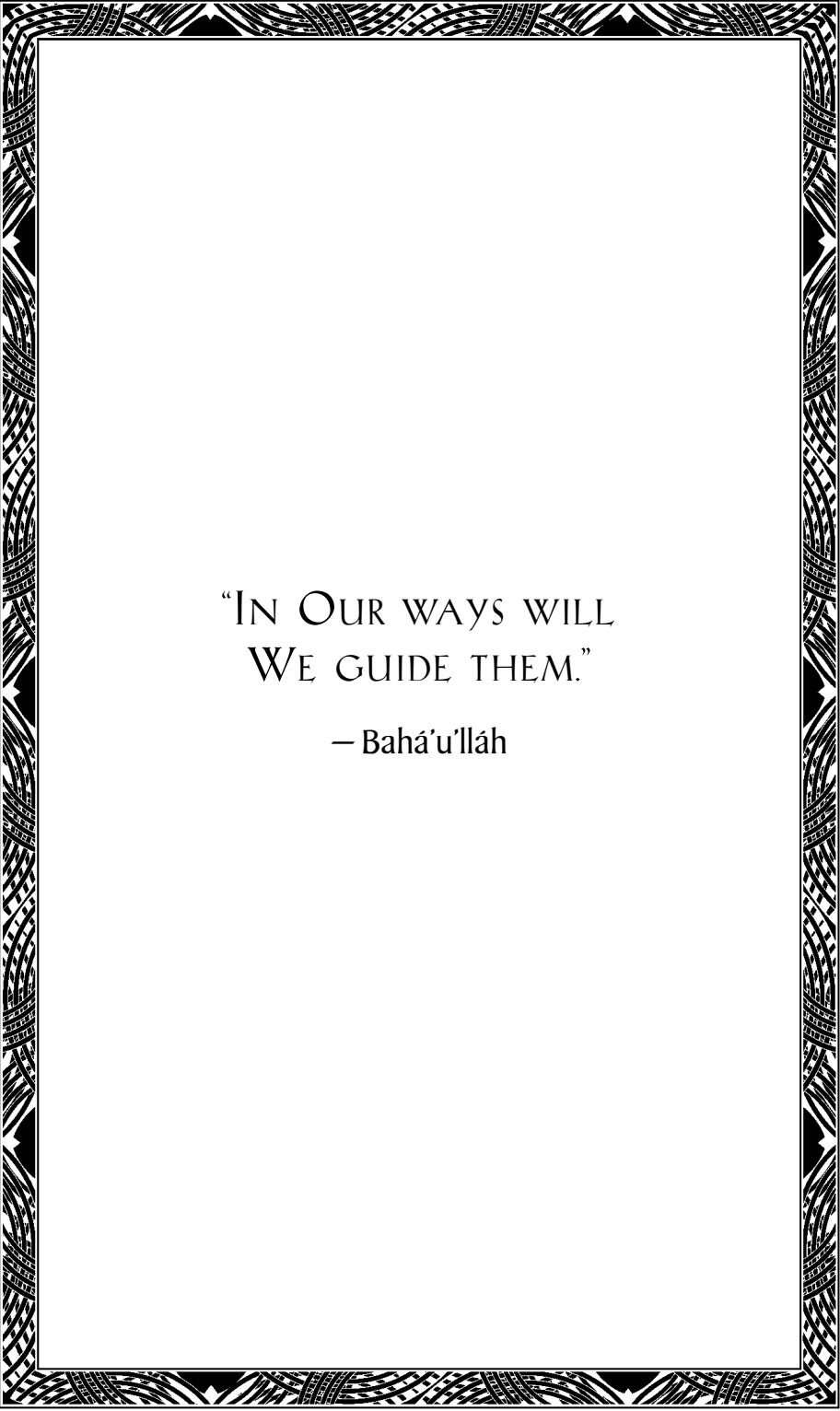
Around this time, I started working for the Social Services Division of the Kenyan government. By 1967, I had risen

through the ranks and was selected among 8 other women to take a special training course in Israel that lasted for one year. It was a tough decision for me to leave my husband and children on their own for a year but we decided that it was the best thing to do. So my mother and father decided to help in raising all of the children while I was away.

When I arrived in Israel, I realized that it was an excellent opportunity to learn more about the Bahá'í Faith. After getting in touch with Mr. Ali Nakhjavani, he began to pick me up every weekend so that I could visit the shrines and other Holy places on Mt. Carmel and in Akka. One day, he took me to have lunch with Ruhiyyih Khanum, wife of the late Shoghi Effendi, the Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith. What I noticed about them was that they treated me with extreme care and as an equal, despite the color of my skin. Previous experiences with Europeans in Kenya had made me feel inferior to white people but for the first time, I did not feel this way around the Bahá'ís. The Bahá'ís really touched my heart during my stay in Israel. By the time the year had ended, I became more deepened and in touch with the teachings of the Faith.

After I returned to Kenya and told my husband about my experience, he did not declare immediately. One of the primary reasons was that he owned a pub from which he sold lots of beer and alcohol to the public. Villagers flocked to his pub and it made him lots of money. However, it was only a matter of time before Mr. Nakhjavani and many other Bahá'í teachers visited us. The Bahá'í friends told my husband why selling beer was not a good business to be in and explained why Bahá'u'lláh had prohibited it. After teaching him for quite some time, my husband saw the wisdom of what they were saying and eventually became a Bahá'í. He later sold his pub and opened up a bakery.

My husband became a devoted Bahá'í and donated large tracts of land for the opening of a school that is still in existence. In later years, my children also became Bahá'ís, three of whom have served at Bahá'í institutions throughout the world. My eldest daughter, Esther, served at the Maxwell International Bahá'í School, my second eldest daughter, Gladys, currently serves at the Ruaha Bahá'í School in Tanzania, and my son, Noah, served at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa. I lost my husband several years ago to diabetes but that tragic loss was later offset by the joy of being chosen to attend the opening of the Terraces in Haifa with 18 other Kenyan believers. Returning to Israel was an unexpected bounty I will never forget. After seeing the many faces of humanity flowing from the foot of that Holy Mountain to its summit, it reassured me that Bahá'u'lláh's promises to humanity are quickly coming to pass. ❁



“IN OUR WAYS WILL
WE GUIDE THEM.”

— Bahá'u'lláh

FISHING ON THE NET

Jeanette Corsino ✿ U.S.A.

Jeanette discovered the Faith on the Internet. She declared on April 21st, 2001, on the anniversary of the Declaration of the Báb. She currently resides in Allentown, Pennsylvania.

My story begins back in September of 2000, when I was going through some soul searching and was wondering about finding a real connection to my Lord. The kids were off to school and my husband had bought us this computer that I did not know how to use. I had heard so many people talk about chat rooms and all the people you could meet there. I felt compelled to try this despite my lack of experience in using the Internet. One day I decided to give it a try and see what chat rooms were all about. The first time I went into a chat room, I happened to visit a Christian chat room but didn't participate in the discussion going on. I just read what the topic of the day was. I was really confused about religion at the time, even though I was supposedly a 'Born Again' Christian and had been raised Catholic. I felt as though something was missing in my life and I couldn't relate to a lot of the required traditions. I really knew only what was taught to me and so watching what everyone was talking about fascinated me.

I did this for several weeks. I just went into a chat room and watched until one day someone sent me a personal message. At first I was a little hesitant to speak one on one with this total stranger. But he didn't seem to be asking me things on a personal level so I decided to chat with him. His name was

Marshal and he was a 27-year-old man who lived in India. I thought wow! I am talking to someone as far away as India! It's funny how I could be in Pennsylvania and talk to someone as far away as India. He asked me what my religion was and I said I was a Christian. When I asked him about his religion he told me he was a Bahá'í. At first I was dumbfounded, "A what?" He proceeded to explain some of the general beliefs that the Bahá'ís believed in. I thought to myself well this is interesting and I was interested in knowing more. Of course I couldn't stay in the chat room all day so I said my good byes and told him that I would be back the following day. Sure enough he was there the following day.

I spoke to him about my feelings about my present religion and how I was not happy. And I told him I was presently trying to read the Bible and it just seemed so confusing to me. He advised me not to take all the words so literally and to meditate on what I was reading. I followed his instructions and that led me to have more questions. I asked him about where I could find more information about the Bahá'í Faith and he gave me a few suggestions on books I could read. I went to the local library and sure enough many of the books he told me about were there. I continued to meet my religious buddy in the same chat room every day. I looked forward to my daily chats with him.

The first Bahá'í book I read was *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*. As I read this book I would ask him questions and he would answer my questions while still insisting I investigate for myself. The more I read the more I felt as though this was exactly how I felt about religion. I knew there had to be a religion out there that mirrored my way of thinking. It got to the point that we would have a lesson every time we chatted. I found out that Marshal would stay after work just to chat with me until the security guard would start giving him clues that he had to start going home. He

suggested to me that the next book I should read to continue my investigation was *Thief in the Night*. I searched and searched and finally found the book on an Internet website. I ended up paying twice as much as the book was worth. As I started reading it, I would take down notes and the following day I would ask Marshal to explain what it meant or to further explain the situation. He was very knowledgeable.

Then one day he told me he met someone in India who was from my town and he asked her to contact me via email as she was just passing through India and would be back home soon. Days turned into weeks, and weeks into months. But we stayed in contact daily. I kept asking him questions that arose from my readings of Bahá'í material. I became very close to Marshal. One day he told me that he was accepted to serve at the Bahá'í World Center in Haifa, Israel. I was thrilled yet saddened by the thought of losing contact with him. He assured me that as soon as he arrived in Haifa, that he would contact me via Internet so that we could chat again. And just as he promised we began meeting in the same chat room after he started working at the Bahá'í World Center.

I decided to contact the Bahá'ís in my area. After attending two firesides, I immediately signed up for the Ruhi class. I went to the Ruhi class on Monday and would tell Marshal what I learned on Tuesday morning. I would give him a detailed account of what I had learned. After completing the Ruhi course, I decided it was time to become a Bahá'í. I declared myself a Bahá'í on the 21st of April, 2001—the anniversary of the Declaration of the Bahá'u'lláh. Marshal and I continue to be the best of friends and we still continue to chat everyday. I once asked him what it was that made him choose me from among all the people on the Internet. And his answer was that he would go fishing on the net for those who were in the religious chat rooms but yet weren't chatting. This was his way of teaching the Faith. I think he was God sent. Here I was in the midst of searching for God on the Internet and Marshal threw the hook that brought me to the Faith. ❀

O YE FISHERS OF MEN

Scott Bodie ❁ U.S.A.

Scott served in the Navy and became a Bahá'í after going to firesides all over the world. He has pioneered to Uruguay and Brazil and currently resides with his family on a cattle ranch in Burhcard, Nebraska.

Growing up on a Nebraska cattle ranch in the 1950s and 60s, being disillusioned with college after two years, and entering the Navy gives the impression of *Sailor on Horseback* by Jack London. While in the Navy, on my first ship, the U.S.S. Apache, which was a fleet tug, I encountered a cook by the name of Lyle Turner from Montana. At that time I was a mess cook, spending three months of my four-year duty as a cook's helper. While passing through the mess deck (the eating area) one afternoon, I noticed Lyle reading some books at a mess table and asked him what he was reading. Lyle then proceeded to tell me that he was a Bahá'í and gave me a two-minute introduction to progressive revelation. Something in my mind clicked, but I didn't ask any more questions and went on with my business. Later on in the cruise, I encountered other sailors ridiculing Lyle's beliefs and found myself defending him based on the principle of freedom of religion that we hold dearly in the United States. After a few weeks passed while in Hawaii, Lyle invited me to Bahá'í meetings, which are commonly known as firesides. Even though I declined, Lyle politely invited me again various times. After about five different invitations, I finally went to a fireside

in San Diego with Lyle and another guy, just to get off the ship. I remember saying to them, “O ye fishermen of men.” We went to a fireside in Imperial Beach, California, at a residential home with various individuals of different races. Being a product of the 1960s I assumed it was a commune. Instead it turned out to be a gathering of Bahá’ís who represented a diverse cross-section of their community. I learned about the basic principles and teachings of the Bahá’í Faith and recognized the truth in these teachings. All I remember is that the people were very friendly and very informative and had this wonderful news of a spiritual message that was universal and world embracing.

While back on the ship and out to sea, I began reading Bahá’í books and my spiritual appetite grew. I soon began to recognize my need to become closer to God. At that time, Lyle was having firesides on the main deck of the ship near a gun turret. After returning back to San Diego various times and attending family firesides in the town of Chula Vista, I became better acquainted with the teachings and the spirit of the Faith. After returning to sea, I recall waking up in my bed one night. It felt like my lungs were being inflated by a rush of air and I felt that it was the breath of the Holy Spirit being blown into me. It was a truly spiritual experience. It was at that moment on the vast Pacific Ocean that I became a believer in Bahá’u’lláh. Upon returning again to Chula Vista, California, I signed my declaration card. I became a Bahá’í during the Fast of 1972, but was unaware of the provisions of the Fast. I recall going through the chow line and Lyle scooping food onto my plate. He was wise not to say anything that would have surely embarrassed me as a new Bahá’í. Gradually Lyle taught me many things, including the midnight prayer. He frequently asked me to wake him up at that time and to take turns saying it with him when I got off watch at midnight. Later there were about five sailors who became Bahá’ís on that ship of seventy-five people.

THE CHOSEN PATH

I transferred to the U.S.S. White Plains and met another Bahá'í while on watch at night. When I started indirectly teaching him the Faith, he said, "Are you a Bahá'í? So am I!" He was an Alaskan Indian from the Aleutian Islands.

Being in the service enabled me to travel to other countries such as the Philippines, Singapore, Japan, and Taiwan, where I met Bahá'ís in their homes, at summer schools, and at other activities. This was my introduction to our Bahá'í world family. At the end of my tour of duty, I returned stateside to Washington State. I met my future bride-to-be, Billie Kay Simmons, at Bahá'í activities in the Seattle area. We got married and pioneered to Uruguay and Brazil for three-and-a-half years. We now have two active Bahá'í daughters and are home front pioneers on our cattle ranch in Nebraska. ❁

I AM A WORLD CITIZEN

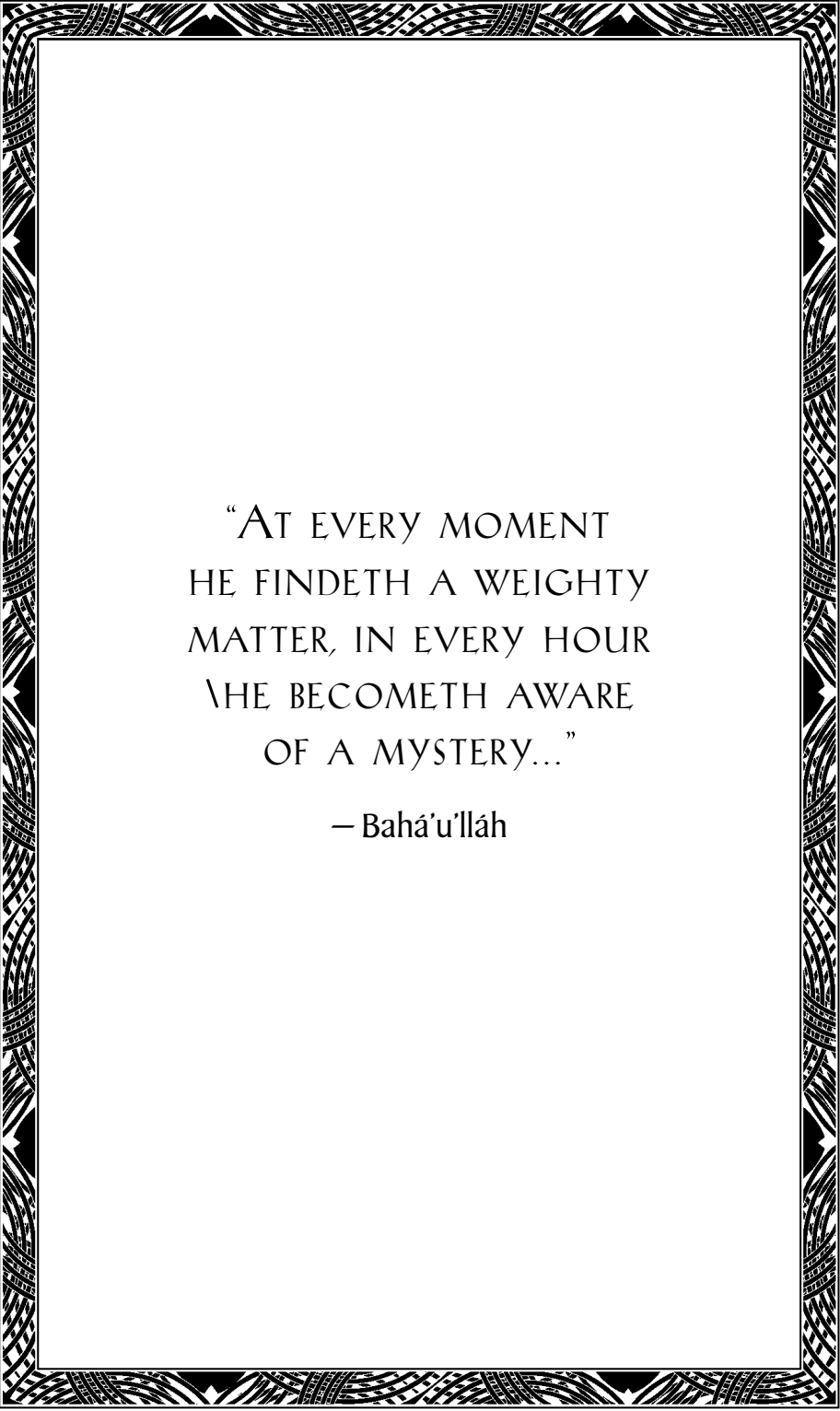
Julius Garga ❁ Nigeria

Julius was born in Nigeria as a Christian. He became a Bahá'í in the city of Lagos in 1979. He currently resides in Rochester, New York.

At the age of 17 I left the church and tagged myself as a free thinker. My quest for knowledge of the Great Mystery started when I began reading books on philosophy, mysticism, alchemy, psychometry, palmistry, and astrology. I also delved into other ancient holy scripture that included Buddhism, Krishna, and the book of a Buddhist monk named Mr. Lobsang Tuesday Rampa. Coincidentally, it was Mr. Rampa's book that prepared me for the Bahá'í Faith. In one of his books, *The Chapters of Life*, he compared all the Holy Teachers—which he called Avatars—as messengers of God. He likened all of the prophets like Abraham, Moses, Krishna, Buddha, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, the Báb, and Bahá'u'lláh as one and the same. He also said they came to this world from time to time to teach the world. He referred to them as world teachers who were as Gardeners to the earth. He said they usually disguise themselves in human flesh to live amongst us. He claimed that they were like mirrors of God on earth. The example he used was that Christ had appeared on earth many times and his appearance was destined to occur again.

In 1979, in the port of Lagos, Nigeria, West Africa, a man was standing next to me. I looked at the emblem on the ring he was wearing and asked him what was the meaning of

it. He said it was a religious emblem. I asked him what kind of religion is this? He said that it represented the Bahá'í Faith. I asked him if this religion was a sect of the Buddhist faith. He replied "no" and went on to tell me that it was an independent universal religion with a new Prophet who brought a new message for humanity. He explained that Bahá'u'lláh's message was for all of mankind and that it stood for the oneness of God, the oneness of religion, and the oneness of mankind. That quickly reminded me of a t-shirt I made a few years before that read "I Am a World Citizen." I was not a Bahá'í when I made this t-shirt and so these teachings really connected with the way I had always felt about religion. I then asked him where was the home of the prophet. He told me that the world headquarters of the Bahá'í Faith was in Israel. Rather than mention the original origins of Bahá'u'lláh, he chose to tell me the final residence and location of the Shrine of Bahá'u'lláh. He knew that I was from southern Nigeria, where the majority of the inhabitants are predominantly Christian. After hearing that the Bahá'í Faith was established in Israel, I said to myself that if there is any new revelation or prophet from Israel, I have to investigate it. I asked him for the address of the local Bahá'í center and immediately started my investigation for about a year. After that, I soon became a Bahá'í. In Africa there is a lot of tribal prejudice. The Bahá'í Faith has solutions to most of the social and spiritual problems that exist in Africa. And especially Nigeria, which has over 120 million people and is considered the most populous black nation in the world. ❁



“AT EVERY MOMENT
HE FINDETH A WEIGHTY
MATTER, IN EVERY HOUR
HE BECOMETH AWARE
OF A MYSTERY...”

— Bahá'u'lláh

THE BALL WITH A NAME

Dumansane Gama ✿ Swaziland

Dumasame Gama works as a police officer in Matsapha, Swaziland, and serves as a member of the Matsapha Bahá'í community. He became a Bahá'í after having a series of mystical dreams and reading a book about the Bahá'í Faith.

In 1997 I had left the church and was doing some research on other religious faiths. Around this time, I began to have very mysterious dreams, which I understood to mean that I was undergoing spiritual rebirth. In one of the dreams, I was in the eastern part of Swaziland where I grew up, with a friend and colleague from work. We were at a river I used to swim in, but I noted that the water was very clean. In fact, so clean I could see the sand. I had an overpowering urge to swim in the waist-high water. I took off all of my clothes and got into the water, inviting the friend to join me, but he remarked that what I was doing was foolish. The sand felt so soft, unlike any I had ever felt. I thoroughly washed myself in this water, but my friend refused to join me.

About a month later, I had another strange dream. In the dream, I was juggling a tennis ball, which was black in color, just outside the police station that I happened to be employed at. As I was juggling the ball, it went out of control and bounced so high into the sky that I completely lost sight of it.

I just stood there staring at the sky wondering where the ball had gone. Suddenly, it dropped out of the sky and bounced on the ground again and again. This sequence of bounces was repeated three times and on the last occasion it dropped into a nearby stream that was situated on the side of a cliff. I went down to the stream trying to retrieve the ball but I could not find a suitable point to get into the stream. Just then three males of Asiatic origin came to me and addressed me in siSwati—my language—asking me if I wanted the ball. These men had flowing black hair and were dark skinned like Indians. I followed them down the river until we reached a point where we could get into the stream. At this point there was a young lady of the same nationality as the men with the black hair. She was apparently filling water into a white container using a small white cup. Upon seeing me, she smiled and offered me a drink of this exceedingly clean water. I drank from the cup, but after I was satisfied and wanted to throw away what remained of the water, she warned me never to throw away this precious water as there was very little of it. She then retrieved my tennis ball from the water and gave it to me. When she handed it to me, I noticed that this ball had the word “Bahá’í” written on it! I then woke up and decided to investigate what this word meant.

Two weeks after having the dream, I incidentally found a book written by Gloria Faizi about the Bahá’í Faith. From then to now I fell in love with this Faith. After doing enough reading I started looking for the Bahá’ís to find out how they went about their worship and to confirm some things I had not understood from the books I had read. I finally declared about four months after these series of mystical dreams. ❁

THE ROAD TO BAHIA

Aneri Santiago ❁ Brazil

Aneri was born in the city of Conde, Brazil in 1960 and was a member of the Umbanda religion (African religious sect in Brazil). She was the first person in her family to become a Bahá'í when she turned 16 years old. She is of Native Indian and African descent and currently serves as an Auxiliary Board Member for the Bahá'í Faith in Bahia, Brazil.

I was born on April 2, 1960 in the city of Conde, Brazil. My father was a fisherman and my mother assisted him in his work by preparing the fish for the marketplace. This was very hard work and there was never enough money. My father was an alcoholic and this had a very negative impact on our family. My mother suffered so much from this that she lost much of her charm. When I was about six years old, our father packed us up and took us to live on his mother's farm in a place called Ibicarai. She was of Native Indian heritage and was beautiful! She had brown light eyes, long black hair, and was very pretty.

She was a descendant of the Kariras tribe that no longer exists in Brazil. We stayed with my Grandmother for just two years and we had to pack up and move again. My Father then moved us to a place called Barro Preto to live with my mother's Father. He was a Negro, born in Brazil, whose ancestors originated from Angola, Africa. In this location, we stayed but a short time before Father took us to live in Itabuna.

It was there that my father started to be a clairvoyant and eventually became the leader of a religious group that was associated with Umbanda, an African religion that had been imported from the continent of Africa. Our life changed. In addition to his routine job of fishing for a living and caring for his vegetable garden, He would carry out his religious obligations after nightfall. During these sessions, he had to undertake a number of religious functions and rituals that involved both good and evil. I saw him kill rams and chickens as a sacrifice for some of the individuals that he was trying to help – even criminals. It was at this time, when I was about 12 years old, that I started to participate in the religious sessions with him. As a result of that, people started calling me “small mother”.

In spite of all the religious obligations we were performing, our family was always famished. At this time we were nine brothers and sisters. Although my father and mother received a small side income from their fishing excursions, our prime source of income came from the voodoo sessions that my Father performed for his clients. Some days, things were so bad, our family of eleven had to survive on coffee, flour, and three eggs. As I was getting older, my father awakened me at early dawn to go fishing with him. We often started at 2:00 am in the morning and returned at 6:00 p.m. While my father would catch the fish, my sister Nilma, my brothers, and I would sell the fish on the roadside between the towns of Ilhéus and Itabuna. This enabled us to purchase flour, oil and eggs for our evening meal at home.

One morning while my siblings and I were on the side of the road trying to sell the fish, I felt totally discouraged and frustrated from living such a hard life. The scalding sun was beating down on me and I was starving from lack of food. The cars kept going by without stopping to buy the fish and nothing felt certain. It was at this moment that I saw a car

coming in our direction. I then begged God, saying in my heart, “ God I know you exist. Please make this car stop.” As soon as I made this request, it felt like the Holy Spirit was in my presence. The car pulled over in front of us and the driver bought all of the fish that we had on display. This was such an amazing occurrence that my heart seemed to vibrate with the power of God.

Despite feeling more connected with God, things continued to worsen for our family. Because I was spending so much time selling fish, I did not spend much time in school. I fell behind in my studies and was put back a grade. I eventually had to leave school because my Father abandoned our family and ran off to live with a younger women in the city of Salvador. To add insult to injury, my mother was 8 months pregnant with no financial support.

As soon as my mother realized that my Father was in Salvador with his new girlfriend, she sold our home and departed with all of us to Salvador to find him. After arriving in Salvador, we went straight to my grandmother’s home and found my father there with his girlfriend. Because we had nowhere else to go, we had to live there for a while and witness the humiliation my mother had to suffer living with another woman who now shared her husband. My grandmother did not care much for my mother and this was painfully evident when my mother was about to give birth. She was taken to the hospital and was left there. After she gave birth, she remained there for five days without anyone coming to visit her. As children, we did not know where she was. My Father and Grandmother acted as if my mother did not exist. At the time, I was 12 years old.

I was very worried about my mother, so I decided to go look for her. I went asking for directions and hitchhiking, until I got to the hospital. When I arrived at the entrance, my mother was leaving, coiled in a sheet, with my new brother in

her arms. The three of us came back to my Grandmother's, where my mother stayed for five days. Because of all of the tension in the home, my mother quietly left my nine siblings and me and departed to some unknown destination without telling us. Since I was the oldest, I had the responsibility of having to care for the newborn baby. I had no idea what I was doing but somehow I managed to care for him.

My father and my stepmother never cared for the baby. I gave him food that consisted of cassava, water, flour, and sugar for over two months. On Saturdays and Sundays, my mother would come by to breast-feed the child, but after a while she stopped coming because her milk dried up. During this period, I cried a lot, feeling my mother's absence. I supported her decision not to live with us, but missed her dearly. My father, Grandmother, and others in the house said bad things about my mother because of her absence. My brother who was eleven years old, had to start selling bread full-time in order to make ends meet. It was his little earnings that enabled us to buy the flour, sugar, and eggs needed to feed 10 children.

My mother was soon able to rent a small one-bedroom house for my nine siblings and I. But the strain of having to take care of all us finally took its toll on her, and she eventually became emotionally unbalanced and highly nervous. She began to beat us, and because I was the oldest and resembled my father the most, she took her anger out on me. She would beat me with whatever was in front of her whether it was the handle on the end of a knife or a thick electric cord. During one of these violent episodes against me, I asked God in my torment "Why did you create me? Why did my parents have to separate? Why do I have to always be beaten? Why am I starving?" Despite the questions I posed to God, there were no answers. God seemed not to hear me.

In 1970, my mother started living with her boyfriend in an area called Lauro de Freitas. She moved our family to

another location called Catu-de-Abrantes. One day, I went by bus to Lauro de Freitas to visit my mother and I saw the word “Bahá’í Faith” written on a building that I passed by. At the time, I could not read so well so I did not know what the word meant.

On another occasion, while walking past this building, I saw many youth playing guitar, smiling and hugging each other. They were all so pretty and happy to me. I just stood there in front of the building watching them for about 40 minutes. I was on the other side of the street gazing at them, until someone noticed and invited me to come in to hear them sing. It was like I was under some kind of hypnotic spell or something. I could not believe they were beckoning me to come inside their building because I was very unattractive and unkempt at the time. My clothes were dirty, I was barefoot, and to top it off, had my two front teeth missing. I must have looked pitiful to them.

That same day, I attended a lecture given by a Bahá’í called ‘Gainho’ and another called ‘Reinaldo.’ Soon I fell in love with the life of the Báb. I found the “Bahá’í Faith” wonderful! I thought to myself, this Faith is too good for me and I can never belong to it. All of the people there were all intelligent, cultured, well-dressed and beautiful people. I had such a wonderful time that I lost track of time and went home after 9 p.m. My mother thought I was flirting with young boys and beat me again. From that time on, I went to those Bahá’í meetings every night of the week. I was utterly mesmerized by what I heard and learned.

I soon became a Bahá’í and began to teach children’s classes. One day I went home and tore up all of my African Religious dresses and broke all my ties to the Umbanda sect. When my mother found out what I had done she was livid with anger. She threatened me saying that “Exu is going to kill you.” I told her I didn’t believe it and kept going to the Bahá’í Center and learned more about the Bahá’í Faith.

Because my mother hated the Bahá'í Faith so much, she played a fundamental role in helping me to become firmer in my beliefs and overall Faith in God. She began to beat me relentlessly because she didn't want me to go to the Bahá'í meetings. On one occasion, she put a knife next to my neck and shouted "Do you doubt that I'll kill you?" I answered "If you are going to be happy, you can kill me!" I continued to attend the meetings and began to buy Bahá'í books to read. My mother destroyed the books and tried to make my life miserable. This persecution lasted for about six months. Then, I started to change.

I decided to start teaching the Bahá'í Faith daily throughout the city with other Bahá'í youth. One of the Bahá'ís named Emelia began to mentor me and that is how my love for Bahá'u'lláh began to grow. I began to serve the Bahá'í Faith more and at the age of 16 years old, became a full-time Bahá'í instructor. I was so aflame with the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, I kept striving to learn as much as I could. Sometimes, I would take classes at the Bahá'í Center until midnight. I would often arrive home tired but happy. My mother continued to give me problems until a wonderful opportunity came my way. I was told that I could go and live in the Regional Bahá'í Center in Bahia where I could be a caretaker. I will never forget this day as long as I live. A man named Mr. Oscar came to tell me the good news, and I knew that my prayers had been answered.

I packed my things quickly and made plans to go. My mother, looked at me in a state of shock and asked "Will you go?" I answered "Mother, you've always sent me away to live on my own in the past but I always returned because I was afraid of what I would become. But, now I'm going to a good and safe place. I am sorry, but I have to go". I don't know what my mother was thinking, but before I could change my mind, I headed for Bahia.

When I arrived in the Bahá'í Institute of Bahia, I was filled of happiness! What I had wished for over one year had finally happened. Even though I was very happy, I was very worried about my sisters and brothers. I wanted to take care of them and come to their aid if they needed help. For a month, I couldn't eat, because I missed them so much. I missed them mostly at night, because we used to all sleep close together in the same bed made of coconut straw leaves. Now, I slept in a bed all by myself that had a mattress and clean linen. I was also able to eat three meals a day, while my siblings perhaps hadn't eaten anything. I felt very bad about this. Thinking about this sad reality made me depressed. One day a friend named Ann Couto noticed my pain. She told me not to be sad and that I should pray for my siblings and put them under The Báb's and Bahá'u'lláh's care. It was this advice that alleviated my sorrow and helped me focus on my duties as a caretaker of the Bahá'í Institute.

I lived for a year and six months in the Institute. And it was there that I met my husband, Jorge Santiago. After we got married, we traveled as pioneers to live and teach the faith of Bahá'u'lláh in the country of Paraguay. When we arrived in Paraguay, we were very happy to serve there. After spending one year there, we returned to Brazil and resumed our Bahá'í work here.

I am grateful that the Bahá'ís took me in off of the streets and gave me a spiritual education and love that I could have never found anywhere else. I now serve as an Auxiliary Board member in Bahia and have devoted my life to teaching as many people as I can about the Bahá'í Faith. ❀

FAITH IN A BOX

Kathi Ruiz ❁ U.S.A.

K*athi first read about the Bahá'í Faith in a comparative religion book. After meeting Bahá'ís and attending meetings, she became a Bahá'í after encountering a mystical experience in a library. She currently resides in Sherwood, Oregon.*

From a very young age, I searched for my place in the world of religion. My family went to a Methodist church until I was ten and I loved the symbolism, camaraderie, and values I found there. Still, it didn't seem quite right to me. So, at a very young age, I began to look at other religions. I read everything I could on different faiths and went to a variety of churches and gatherings. I checked out the Catholic Faith, Judaism, and even the Hari Krishna Movement. By the age of 16, I had read every major religious book there was, and still was not satisfied.

All Faiths seemed to hold a piece of the puzzle, but none offered a complete picture of what I was searching for. I was getting to the end of the road, thinking I would be forever searching, forever Agnostic. Then I found a little paragraph in a comparative religions book. It was about the Bahá'í Faith. It was intriguing, even exciting, but before I could search out local adherents, my world fell apart.

My father, in an effort to help my mother with her increasingly chaotic mental condition, decided to move us to a small, country town. I was devastated. How was I going

to find out anything about the Faith if I was living in Podunk, USA?

A few months after the move, I saw a tiny ad in the 16-page local newspaper. A group of Bahá'ís lived in the area and held open Sunday services. Initially I was very apprehensive about meeting the Bahá'ís. Would they look crazed, or have strange eating customs? Even better, I found my head nodding in agreement as they shared their beliefs with me. I soon joined their Sunday morning study group. It was great fun, and I loved visiting and talking with them.

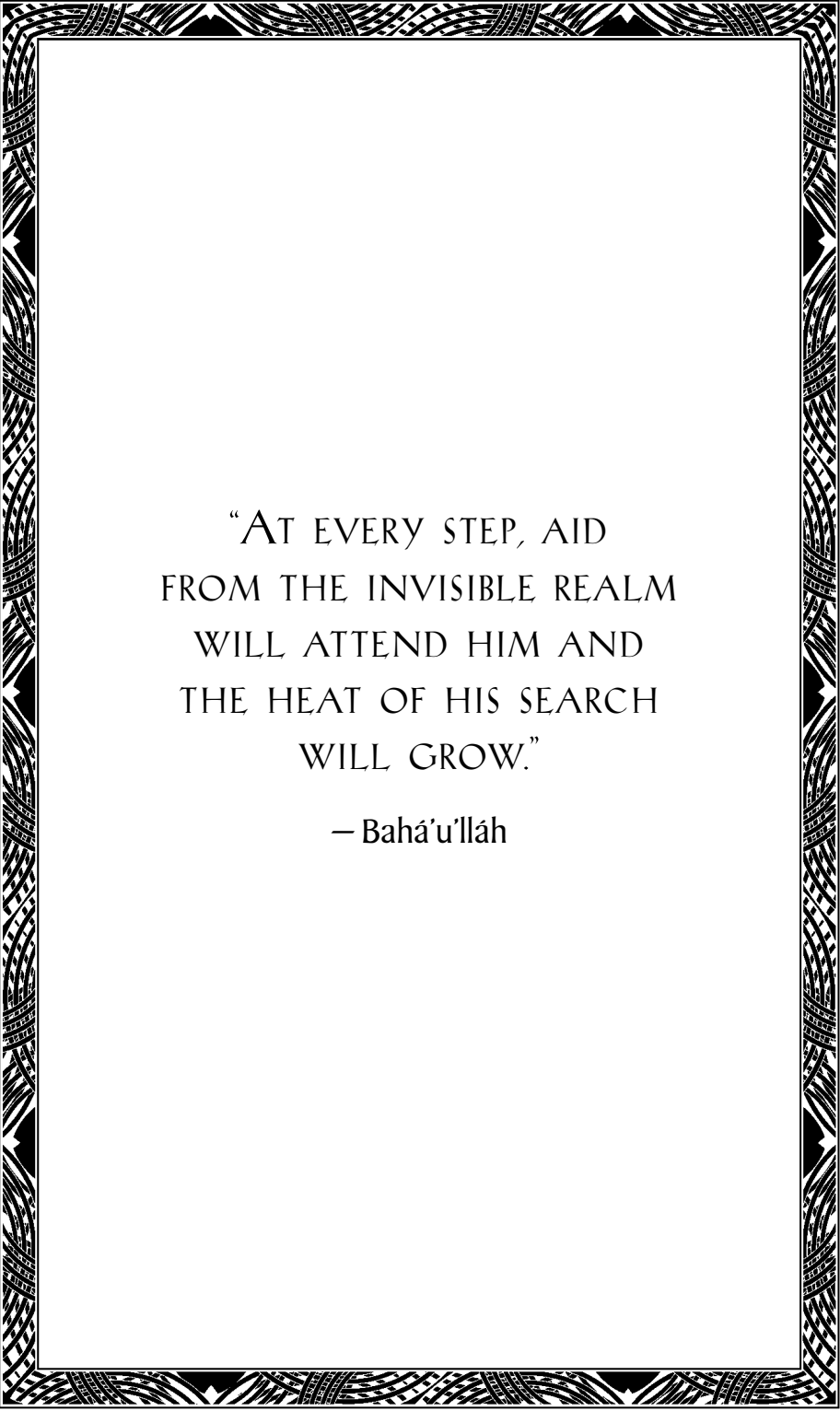
Yet, I was cautious about making a commitment to becoming a Bahá'í. My Christian roots were strong and there was still a feeling that Satan was tempting me. What made this situation all the more challenging was that my family teased me about the Faith, and mocked Bahá'u'lláh's name. At this stage I was very torn and did not know what to do. And so it went, back and forth.

I struggled with my reasons for wanting to embrace this Faith, and whether or not it was the good or wise choice. It made me sick to think about it. And on top of all this, I was still trying to adjust to my mother's mental illness and a new town. One day I just snapped. I woke up, and made a vow: "DEAR GOD, SHOW ME A SIGN THAT I SHOULD BECOME A BAHÁ'Í. IF I DO NOT RECEIVE A SIGN FROM YOU TODAY, I WILL NOT LIVE BY ANY FAITH AT ALL." I made this vow with all the passion and youthful arrogance a 17 year old can muster, and went about my business.

Being pretty skeptical by nature, I really didn't expect anything. But in my heart of hearts, I hoped that the true path would be revealed. All day long, I received no sign. No parting of the sea, no white dove sent down from heaven. It was one of the longest days of my life. By evening, my cynical side had

hardened my heart, and I felt like such a fool for even hoping that God would bless me with His notice. On my way home, I decided to drop off some books at the library. It was my last stop of the day. I had books to drop off but no time to browse. As I hurried out, I noticed a dilapidated box in the corner with a note, “FREE BOOKS.” How long could it take?

So I went over and started digging around. And at the bottom of the box I found a slender book in perfect condition entitled, *Bahá’í Prayers for Children*. Then it hit me. Hard. I was a newborn in the Bahá’í Faith, a child. This was MY prayer book, a gift—a sign—from God. The next Sunday, I made my public declaration of Faith to my friends. After 20 years of being a Bahá’í, this book is still one of my most cherished possessions. ❀



“AT EVERY STEP, AID
FROM THE INVISIBLE REALM
WILL ATTEND HIM AND
THE HEAT OF HIS SEARCH
WILL GROW.”

— Bahá'u'lláh

REMEMBER My DAYS DURING Thy DAYS

Ha Le ❁ Vietnam

Ha Le was born into a Buddhist family in Vietnam and later fought in the Vietnam War. After being captured and placed in a concentration camp, he heard about the Bahá'í Faith. He currently resides in Honolulu, Hawaii.

It was the end of 1980 and I had been in a concentration camp under the communist regime in Vietnam for five years. Each day we were forced to do back breaking work and were severely deprived of getting enough to eat. Many of my fellow officers were malnourished and some were on the brink of death. It was at this moment in my life that my mind seemed empty and time seemed eternal. None of us in the camp thought we would ever be freed and some gave up the hope to live. As for myself, I turned inward and decided to develop my spiritual self since I could not develop my physical self.

Luckily, there were many religious prisoners in the c a m p . They were Buddhist monks, Catholic Priests, Protestant Pastors, and others. I thought that maybe they could help me to increase my knowledge about spirituality. Since I was born a into a Buddhist family, I knew some of the teachings and paragraphs of prayers which I used to say under my breath, hoping to overcome the stressful circumstances I was under in the camp. However, with a shallow knowledge of the Buddhist teachings, I could not solve the contradiction in my mind about whether Buddhism would still be appropriate

for the present time. The need for searching the truth urged me to find out. So in the camp, I went to meet believers of other religions in an attempt to find out more about their doctrines, and get this question in my mind answered.

At first, I went to see those who were knowledgeable about the Buddhist teachings. I learned after meeting them that they only recognized the Buddha and did not accept other religious teachings. Then I went to visit the Catholic prisoners about their teachings. They seemed to be more united and actively helped each other, but they only loved those of the same Faith who believed as they did. They felt that Jesus Christ was the only way to salvation. Similarly, the Protestants were very similar to the Catholics. The only difference is that they had different theological interpretations about the Bible. I soon became very disappointed with what I encountered and my expectation to see unity and harmony between the various prisoners of different religions did not materialize.

Nonetheless, my thirst for knowledge motivated me to continue my search. One day, on Sunday, prisoners in the camp had permission to go from cell to cell. The concentration camp had many long cells, and each cell was called a room. Between each room were barbwire fences, which had little gates. I decided to go to the next room to visit one of my friends and talk about my search for truth. After telling him about my search for truth he asked me, "Have you met anyone around here who is a part of the Bahá'í Faith?" That was the first time I had ever heard about the Bahá'í Faith. At first I mistook Bahá'í to be a woman's name because in the Vietnamese language 'Ba' means Madame. So I thought it meant Mrs. Hai. I asked him with a little disdain, "Who is Ba Hai(sic), and what theories does she teach?" Where are the followers of 'Ba Hai'(sic). My friend smiled and said, "He is in my room. Come inside and meet him." It seemed

as if something was pushing me to go and meet this person so I decided to see what was different about this religion. After entering the room, there were several people there. I was greeted by a tall thin man who was smiling brightly at me so I assumed that was the follower of the Bahá'í religion. I shook his hand and said, "I have heard that you are a follower of the 'Ba Hai'(sic). Please tell me about it." The man spread a mat in front of us and invited me to sit down with him on it. He had a very polite and hospitable nature about him that I respected. He immediately began to teach me about his religion.

He said "when you hear the word "Bahá'í," you might think that it is a woman whose name is Hai but that is not what it is. Bahá'í means light and glory. It is the name of the followers of Bahá'u'lláh—the founder of the Bahá'í Faith. The Bahá'í Faith is a new religion of our time. He went on to talk about other religions and instead of making disparaging remarks, explained how they complemented each other. It was evident that he had learned many different teachings in detail. He showed me how to practice Bahá'í principles in daily life and put my Buddhist teachings in perspective in terms of how it fit into the present time. He also discussed the principles concerning the 'Unity of Mankind', 'Unity of God', and the oneness of the Prophets. He emphasized the importance of investigating the truth on one's own and stated that the Bahá'í Faith did not have a clergy. After hearing this, I felt liberated from the system of the clergy. When he discussed the principle about the "Equality of Men and Women" I was so happy that I began to cry. I thought of all of the mothers in Vietnam who had suffered for countless generations under a feudal system that kept women oppressed strictly because of their gender. The Bahá'í Faith seemed to have the answers that my country was looking for.

After the man told me what he believed, my heart was so joyful and happy. I felt like I could fly. I held the Bahá'í teachers hand in a warm and friendly way and said goodbye. Leaving the room, I felt as if my soul was flying. I turned back and wondered how they could put such a wonderful man in this prison. My questions about religion were gradually answered through the Bahá'í teachings. The Bahá'ís taught me 12 basic principles, some prayers, and verses of the book called *The Hidden Words*. My adventure of searching for the truth bore fruit on February 10, 1981. That is the day I became Bahá'í. I fasted with the other Bahá'ís during the month of March (2nd to 21st) for the first time. Every year since that time, when I have to fast, I still remember my first fast in prison. It reminds me of the Bahá'í prayer in which Bahá'u'lláh—during His days of exile and imprisonment—said “Remember My days during thy days and My distress and banishment in this remote prison.” Bahá'u'lláh's love and sympathy sustained me and gave me the strength to overcome the hardest time in my life. ♣

DOOR OF FAITH

Jonathan King ✿ U.S.A.

J*onathan was born in Albany, Georgia in 1957 and attended Morehouse College in Atlanta. After college, he studied and lived in Japan for seven years and later worked at the Maxwell International Bahá'í School in Canada. He currently resides in Austin, Texas.*

I was born on the 27th of June, 1957 in Albany, Georgia, a sleepy town not too far from the city of Plains, the home of former President Jimmy Carter. From as early as I can remember, religion was a very big part of my life. Although my mother and father went to different churches, they instilled in my siblings and I the belief that there was a Just and Loving God Who loved all people regardless of race, creed, or nationality. At the time, black people were relegated to second-class citizenship in the United States as a result of hundreds of years of slavery and institutionalized racism.

Even as early as five years old, I was aware that blacks were treated differently than whites and that our way of life was substandard by comparison. This made no sense to my siblings or me, and we asked our parents to explain why this disparity existed between the races. Our parents were able to explain discrimination from a biblical context by sharing stories from the Old Testament about how Moses had freed the Jews from 400 years of slavery in Egypt. These stories fired our imagination and kept us hopeful that one day God would send a new Moses to set blacks free. The walls of

segregation began crumbling right before my eyes after the summer of 1963. The civil rights movement was mushrooming all across America and Martin Luther King was the new Moses who became the embodiment of freedom for the oppressed.

The sea of segregation was parted at the beginning of my second grade year in elementary school. Our town leaders decided to integrate the schools in 1964 and I was selected as one of six other black children to integrate Highland Elementary School. It was scary to be the only black in my class, but I eventually got used to it and realized that I was relatively safe from harm. Although the other students did not play with me and called me “nigger” until the word rolled off my back like harmless grains of sand, my teacher, Mrs. Mayo was a very kind woman who protected me against these insults. She also mentored and tutored me every day after school.

The following year, I transferred over to a Catholic School and my religious identity was strengthened and transformed under the weighty influence of the wonderful nuns who taught us about God and the principles of faith and morality. They taught us about the importance of prayer, and instructed us in the development of moral virtues. We learned songs, and attended Mass each Friday. My fourth grade teacher, Sister Casperine, made a huge impact on my life. Although she was only 4’11 and a very petite woman, her influence over the class was as solid as the weight of Mt. Everest. If someone in the class did something naughty like stealing, she was always able to tell a cute anecdote about the importance of being truthful, and without fail, the culprit would confess to the transgression. She was quite an amazing woman. I was so impressed with workings of the Catholic Church, I begged my mother to let me to become a Catholic. My mother promised me that once

I reached the age of 12 years old, I could become Catholic if I was still interested. Little did I know how radically my life would change by the time I reached that age.

Over the next few years, my parents stopped attending their churches regularly and gradually started investigating other spiritual practices. My father began to read a voluminous number of books about Eastern spirituality and mysticism, concerning 'life after death' and psychic phenomena. He and my mother became so interested in developing themselves spiritually, that they went out and purchased a small sculpture of a Buddha meditating in the lotus position and placed it in our prayer room. They began meditating in front of the Buddha like clockwork on a daily basis. Another person that they were extremely interested in was a psychic by the name of Edgar Cayce who was extremely popular with new age thinkers. Many of his admirers believed his predictions about California falling off into the Pacific Ocean just like the story about Atlantis.

In my sixth grade year, my parents received the opportunity of visiting Israel on a tour sponsored by the U.S. Government. The purpose of the trip was to introduce black farmers and developers to innovative farming and agricultural practices being used in Israel. During the last day of the trip, my mother fell ill and could not tour with the rest of the group. The group was scheduled to tour the Bahá'í gardens and shrines on Mt. Carmel in Haifa. Although my mother could not go, my father went with the group and was deeply touched with what he experienced. After coming back to the hotel, he told my mother that he had entered the shrine of the Báb and was moved by its spiritual potency. After returning from Israel, my father appeared to be different. He was less uptight and seemed to be content with his life. He spent more quality time with us as if he did not have much more time to live. Surprisingly, he began talking about the importance of

family unity, and emphasized to me that if anything were to happen to him, that I was responsible for taking care of the family. At the time I was almost 12 years old but did not expect anything to happen to my father because he was in good health and had no apparent physical problems.

Within six months after his return from Israel, my father died in a car accident after returning home from a business trip. It was a very mournful time for my entire family and I was confused about why my father had been taken from me at such a young age. I mourned his death for years and became more detached toward religion. I cried before I drifted off to sleep at night and wondered why God had taken my beloved father before I could say goodbye to him. I attended church less and became apathetic toward becoming a Catholic.

I decided to switch to a public school and concentrated on becoming good at football, playing trumpet in the band, and being popular with girls. After being smothered under the Catholic School's puritanical code for many years, I just wanted to have fun. My mother soon got re-married to my step-father who had three children from his previous marriage. His three children came to live with us and he and my mother eventually bought a big house in the country to accommodate all of us. After a lot of adjusting to new brothers and sisters and the new father figure in the house, it took about two years to feel like a real family.

After things settled down, my mother resumed her spiritual search again. She was not happy with the little Episcopalian church we were attending and our visits became more and more sporadic. By this time she was visiting psychics, going to mind control meetings, and even Edgar Cayce seminars. It was at an Edgar Cayce seminar that she happened to meet a young woman named Cathy Guffy who happened to be a Bahá'í and had recently moved to Albany. After the seminar, they went to a restaurant and talked over coffee. It was at

this restaurant that my mother first heard about the Bahá'í Faith. She started studying the Faith and became a Bahá'í a year later in 1972.

All I can remember is that her life changed drastically. She stopped drinking alcohol, and started attending Bahá'í meetings on a regular basis. What really stood out were the Bahá'í information meetings she started hosting in our home. The meetings included both blacks and whites—something that was at the time still a taboo in the south. At the time, this was very shocking and revolutionary. It was something that just didn't happen in the south. Even though most blacks believed that they were equal to whites, the idea of inviting whites to ones home was unthinkable. I remained aloof from Bahá'ís in the beginning and just thought it was a goofy religious cult that my mother was in temporarily. One day, when I came home to find my mother hosting another Bahá'í informational gathering—known as a fireside—in our home, I happened to see a young black guy there, who happened to be my age. I thought it was strange for him to be there but I was interested in meeting him to find out if he was a Bahá'í. After the meeting was over, I struck up a conversation with him and found out that he was a football player like myself and was also a Bahá'í. He asked me if I knew anything about the Bahá'í Faith and after I said I did not, he proceeded to teach me point by point the beliefs of the Bahá'í Faith in a very intelligent and gentle manner.

I was surprised to find out that I already believed in all of the principles of the Bahá'í Faith. Most importantly, I believed in the elimination of prejudices; the independent investigation of truth; the fundamental belief that all religions share the same truths; and that women and men were equal. It all seemed to make perfect sense! Although I believed all of the principles of the Bahá'í Faith, I wanted to read more to make certain that it was not some kind of benign religious

cult, and that the founder was a true prophet from God. The first book I picked up and read from cover to cover was *Some Answered Questions*. It was a book by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (the son of Bahá’u’lláh) and answered common questions that were biblical and spiritual in nature. This book was the most compelling book about religion I had ever read and it cogently put many of my questions I had about religion to rest. The most powerful testimony to the Faith’s authenticity were the prayers revealed by Bahá’u’lláh, the Báb, and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. After studying the Bahá’í Faith for about a year, I signed my card and began my spiritual journey in the footsteps of my beloved mother who had gently led me to the Faith by her actions of love and purity. She never put any pressure on me to become a Bahá’í and always supported me in my quest for spiritual growth. Although it was years before I was able to grasp the richness of this Faith and its teachings, it changed my life radically. It made me appreciate and value my ethnic identity as a black man in a spiritual sense, and at the same time expanded my consciousness toward becoming a citizen of the world. I owe my life to the Faith and will be forever indebted to my mother for her spiritual guidance in leading me to the door of Faith. ❀

THE PRISONER

Chief Michael O. Uwadianoe ✿ Nigeria

Chief Uwadianoe learned about the Bahá'í Faith in prison from another inmate who happened to be a Bahá'í. After being released from prison, he visited a Bahá'í institute and became a Bahá'í.

I started out my life as a Christian but didn't take religion seriously until after I became an adult. Although I was baptized in the Catholic Church in 1949, it took another 20 years for me to get serious about studying Christianity. I could not find the answers I wanted in the Catholic Church so soon thereafter I became a Baptist. After being Baptist for a while, I then decided to enter the seminary and become a Pastor. Upon graduation I taught in a secondary school and did pastoring at a village church from 1975–1979. In 1980, I began having lots of doubts about the Baptist ministry and resigned from my ministerial post.

At this point in my life, I then turned my life around and started to preach from village to village. I was searching for another religious group to join but had no luck in finding something that I could believe in. In 1986 I retired from teaching and relocated to my hometown in Obiaruku in the Delta state of Nigeria. In Obiaruku, my uncle David, whom I was very close to was arranging to attend my sister's wedding in another state. Because of the pastoring work I was doing I could not accompany him. A woman who was an acquaintance of my Uncle David's named Jane Oba asked him if she could

accompany him to the wedding. She claimed that her parents had given her permission to travel with him so he agreed to take her with him. However, later we found out she had lied about this matter. After Jane went with Uncle David to my sister's wedding, a man she met during the wedding ceremony happened to propose marriage to her. Without thinking of the consequences, Ms. Oba agreed to marry the man, and did not contact her parents to get permission. Since most marriages are arranged, this was a very strange thing to do. (Arranged marriages in Africa are very common whereby a dowry is paid to the family of the bride.) Unfortunately, the girl ran off and got married to the man without telling my uncle David.

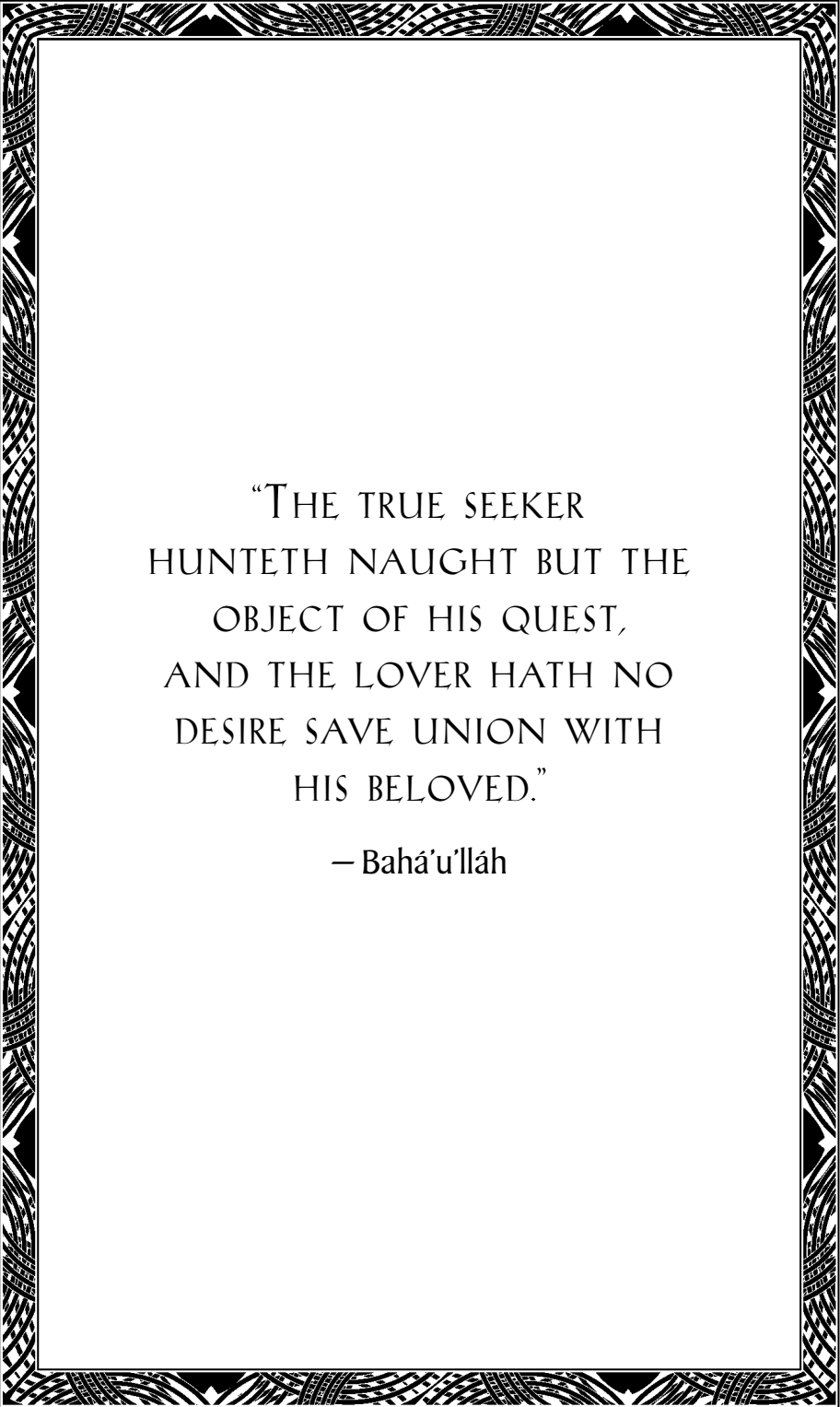
A week later, after trying to find her, Uncle David returned to Obiaruku without her. When Jane's parents found out that my uncle had taken her to another state without their permission, and had returned without her, they told him he must go back and find her. They eventually went to the Magistrate and pressed charges against him for kidnapping. When they found out that I was close to my uncle and had originally made plans to go to the wedding, they also pressed charges against me. We were both arrested and had to appear in court. My uncle appeared in court first and was quickly released on bail. However, in my case things took a turn for the worse and instead of going to court in Obiaruku, I was taken to a station in Benin City, the capital of Bendal state. It was in this police station that I stayed for six weeks before I was released on bail. I was charged for kidnapping a lady I did not even know.

It was during this six-week period in the detention cell that I first heard about the Bahá'í Faith. In the cell, twice a day, the inmates would gather together for songs and prayers after breakfast and dinner. In the cell there were other pastors that were detained just like me. For this reason, preaching in the cell was commonplace. After one of us would preach the

gospel, there would be a round of songs and prayers, which would be followed by a communal chant of “Amen.” I began to notice after each prayer service that one of the inmates named Joseph Egwu never said “Amen” after the prayers. So I went to him and asked him why he never said “Amen” after the prayers. He told me that the reason he did not, was because he was a Bahá’í. It was my first time hearing about the Bahá’í Faith. In all my readings, I had never come across the word. So I asked him to tell me more about the Bahá’í Faith. In his explanation he told me the Bahá’í Faith was a religion of its own and that it teaches three main things: God is one, mankind is one, and all religions are one. He also told me that if I wanted to know about the Faith, I could go to a Bahá’í institute at Oghara Junction, in the Delta State region, and investigate the Faith on my own. After getting out of prison, I visited the Bahá’í institute where I met a Bahá’í named Charles Garman, who happened to be a pioneer from the United States. He gave me books that I read and I became even more interested in the Faith. After reading everything I could get my hands on about the Faith, I called all the members of my family together, which included all of my wives and my children. I told them that the real reason that I had been arrested and detained by the police in Benin was to learn about the Faith so that I could bring it to my people.

When I finally accepted the Bahá’í Faith, one of my wives, Mrs. Serah Uwadione, also joined the Faith with me. Soon after that, a greater number of my children, including Chibuzor Uwadione, became Bahá’ís. Eventually, I was vindicated of any wrongdoing concerning Mrs. Oba. She later came out of hiding and told the police that she was not kidnapped by anybody and that she left the man she had married because of irreconcilable differences.

Today we have the Bahá’í Faith in Obiaruku, Umuebu, Ndemili, and Nsukwa. The Cause of Bahá’u’lláh has spread because of my being detained as a prisoner under false accusations. ❀



“THE TRUE SEEKER
HUNTETH NAUGHT BUT THE
OBJECT OF HIS QUEST,
AND THE LOVER HATH NO
DESIRE SAVE UNION WITH
HIS BELOVED.”

— Bahá'u'lláh

JESUS CAFÉ

Joyce Raine ✿ U.S.A.

Joyce was introduced to the Bahá'í Faith over the Internet. She became a Bahá'í on October 4, 1997. She currently resides in Barstow, California.

As far back as I can remember I have been involved in churches and learning about God. However, what I remember the most is that I attended church as a place to meet my friends and socialize. When I was 14 years old, we moved to a new town. I started attending an American Baptist Church. My parents never attended church, so I just went where my current friends attended. This church had a large youth group that had activities almost every weekend. I was always allowed to go to activities with the church so I continued to attend.

By the time I was 16 years old, most of my friends had been baptized. I felt I needed to do this to be fully accepted. I thought it would give me this really close spiritual feeling that I heard other people talk about. At this point, God to me was an elusive father figure in the sky. I had questions but never seemed to get answers that would satisfy my curiosity.

I continued to attend church after I went to college, again for the social aspects, not for spiritual reasons. All the sermons were salvation related. I really felt something was missing in my life and longed to have questions answered. Religion was very impersonal in my life. My minister at the time would always put down other faiths just to make our religion—the

Baptist Faith—look good. He was especially against the Catholic Religion. The more he pointed his finger at them, the more curious I became about that faith. I started a class with the local priest to find out for myself what was so wrong with Catholic beliefs. I was very honest with him and told him from the beginning about my minister, never mentioning the church he represented, and that I did not want to become Catholic but wanted to understand the truth of their beliefs. He ended up teaching me the whole catechism. I learned so much and made a close friend. At the end of the instruction we parted, remaining friends but I always felt he thought I would convert.

I moved again and still chose to attend an American Baptist Church. I was attending a different college now and became friends with the foreign exchange students. Occasionally I would meet one man from Saudi Arabia and another one from Iran. Neither of them was Christian. However, I was fearful that if I mentioned religion they might not continue our friendship so I just never mentioned anything to do with religion.

Then I got married to a man I had gone to high school with. He had attended the same church I did during my teenage years. We felt we should attend church, because that is the way we were both raised. However, after going a few times together, we reverted back to our old ways and stopped attending.

Two years later our first son was born and we moved again. We joined a Southern Baptist church, but since my husband worked rotating shifts, I attended alone most of the time. I became active in the women's group, but still never felt the closeness I kept hearing others talking about. The ministers all seemed to only talk about salvation, but nothing beyond that topic. Occasionally we would hear a stewardship or tithing sermon. But nothing had really changed. Our minister still criticized other religions and painted a false picture of the Baptist religion being the only true faith.

After our second son was born, we moved again and I joined another Southern Baptist church that had a good program for children. I wanted them to be active as I had been when I was a child, but eventually we just stopped going as before.

After years of not going to church, a strange thing happened in 1997. I got introduced to computers and started browsing the Internet. At first I was reluctant and tried not to venture too far into this unknown world of cyber space but the more I used it the more I learned, and the more tempting each journey became. Each day I used the computer, I kept seeing a place called Talk City advertised and finally decided to check it out. Being a bit skeptical from all the stories I had heard about the “net,” I was cautious and decided to go to a religious chat room. I felt it would be safe to chat there. I found one entitled “Jesus Café.” It was a room where Christian people would meet. Some would act goofy, some would share their testimonies, and some would come asking for prayers. I found it very interesting that people from all over the world could use this Cyberspace café as medium to share their ideas. I enjoyed being a part of the group. Although it was basically a Christian oriented room, not everyone who came there was Christian.

One night I met a man in a chat room who started talking with me. After exchanging all of the usual information on meeting someone new, I asked him if he was a Christian. To my surprise he said, “No, I’m a Bahá’í.” I had heard of the word but had no idea what it really was. So I asked him. That meeting started a long conversation that night. The next night I went back and he was there again. He asked me if I would like to meet him in the Bahá’í Faith room of Talk City. I agreed and he continued to explain his faith to me. I have always enjoyed learning of other faiths and this one was very interesting to me.

After a few meetings with him I really wanted to learn

more about this faith and asked him if he would do a study with me. He agreed and started e-mailing me things to read. He is a graphic designer and had added beautiful pictures to many of the writings he sent to me. Most of them were written by someone named Bahá'u'lláh, who I was to find out was the prophet/founder of his faith. I was so intrigued with this faith. The more I read, the more I found myself saying, "This is exactly how I feel." I told my friend, Ken, that I had no intentions of joining this faith but just wanted to learn about it.

I had read the Bible all through my life but really did not have a deep understanding about what I was reading. Ken told me that I should have a King James Version with the words Christ written in red letters. I did not have one like this and to my surprise he sent me his own study Bible. I started reading the passages he had underlined and flagged. I began to understand it and God's word was becoming clear to me.

About this time, he sent me several books to read. The first book I chose was written by a Christian. It was *Portals to Freedom*. The author was very much like me, always asking questions. I was beginning to know that I would never forget all that I was learning and felt that I had found a faith that made sense to me. It was difficult to understand some of the literal teachings I had been taught over the years, but when I realized how everything fit together it was like the sky opening up for me. The other book that Ken sent me was a prayer book. As I read the prayer, I began to feel God's presence more than I had ever felt in the past.

My job at this time was to order and stock products for retail stores. One day I was in the parking lot of one store and dreaded going in. This store was always a problem and the workers were very unfriendly. I decided to pray one of the Bahá'í prayers before entering the store that day and just asked God to help me with these people. When I came out of

the store an hour later I was walking on air. What happened inside was so amazing. Not only was every single person I had to work with exceptionally nice but also two people offered to help me with a task I had to do that day. When I came out, I immediately thanked God for helping me and I felt a tightness in my chest. It was like He was finally hearing me and was close to Him.

Ken had to move to a new state, and I was left on my own for a while. He entrusted me to help out in the Bahá'í chat room while he was getting settled. I was not sure about this as I really didn't want people who visited the chat room to think I was a Bahá'í. Again, I became amazed with what happened while Ken was away. The people who visited the chat room during this time were not seekers but Bahá'ís who just happened to wander in. I learned more and was really beginning to feel that God was leading me to this faith.

From the simple beginnings of meeting one person in a chat room, I was not an operator in this room and met people from all over the world. One of the main teachings of this faith is one world, one faith, and one God. I could see this in the people who came by the chat room. I was beginning to wonder, "How can I give up being a Christian and become a Bahá'í?" I was reading *Thief in the Night* by William Sears at this time. He wrote of things that I had always felt but not found in other faiths.

One night before going to the chat room I had been reading my Bible and decided to pray before getting on my computer. I just sat in my living room being quiet for a while, trying to be ready for God to talk with me. I had never experienced this and wanted to "feel" God's closeness. As I began to pray I started feeling the tightness in my chest that I had experienced in the parking lot. I asked God to just show me the way. Then I had this overwhelming urge to read in the

Bible. So I picked it up and just said out loud, “Sure and just where does one start reading?” Almost immediately, I thought of the book of Matthew. So, I turned to that book and just asked, “Where do I go now?” Again an immediate thought was to read chapter 23, verse 39. When I read the verse I started to cry as it was the exact verse to answer the questions I had asked of God. This is the verse: “For I say unto you. Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.” This was said by Jesus and referred to the return of Christ. I knew, at this point, that I could never be happy with any other faith.

I declared on October 4, 1997. I am the only Bahá’í in my town and this is sad for me. I crave being able to have fellowship with people. However, through the Internet I have met several people who are of this Faith. I have assisted in a burial, attended a wedding, and in June 2001, I visited Haifa with Ken and his wife for pilgrimage. ❀

BLOOMING LIKE THE ROSE

Lou Meyer ❁ U.S.A.

Lou attended Catholic schools during his early childhood. He was ordained in the Catholic priesthood in 1945 and was sent as a missionary to India. He later served as the National Director of the Catholic Relief Services in Uganda. He became a Bahá'í in Vacaville, California in 1991 and currently resides in Evansville, Indiana.

From as far back as I can remember, I have had an ever-questioning, ever-yearning search to understand Christ. My first such experience occurred during my early elementary school years and it proved to be of lifetime significance. On my way to attend the nearest Catholic school with my classmates, we passed a Protestant school and some kids who attended that school. They often tried to start fights with us by calling us 'cat-lickers'. My classmates would respond by calling them 'dog-lickers' and eagerly welcomed the fighting. I myself would refuse to fight and was called sissy and coward. I told them that my father taught me not to fight, because as Christians, we were to obey Christ's command to 'turn the other cheek.' Neither the Catholic nor the Protestant boys ever heard of that before.

Obviously their Christian parents never taught them this important teaching of Christ! Thanks to my never-fighting, never-quarrelling, ever kind to all peace-loving parents, I learned early in life the importance of becoming a peacemaker if I were to be a Christian. My parents convinced me that non-

violent and unconditional love was of the essence of Christ's teachings. During my high school years, I became increasingly aware of how most Christians that I knew were seemingly giving little or no thought to living this core message of Christ's gospel. I questioned how they could still call themselves Christians. I received a clue to the answer of my question while I was studying at the University of Notre Dame, where I was preparing for the priesthood as a member of the Congregation of the Holy Cross.

Among the many guest speakers whom I heard give lectures at Notre Dame, I remember only one—the renowned English writer, G.K. Chesterton. When he was asked if the scandalous history of Christianity in its history of burning of heretics at the stake, the shocking looting and killing done by the Holy Crusaders against the Muslims in the Holy Land during the 11th to the 13th centuries; the cold-blooded slaughter of millions of natives by the colonizing European nations; the history of tragic injustices still being inflicted upon the colored people because of race prejudice; and the frequent and continuing dissensions and wars between so-called Christian people indicate Christianity has failed, he answered: “No, Christianity has not failed. It simply has never been tried!”

That statement gave me food for thought. Perhaps it was at that time that I first realized that being a Christian commonly means nothing more than belonging to a Christian church, following a particular creed formulated by the church, and not at all necessarily being a follower of the true teachings of Christ. After my ordination in 1945, I went to India as a missionary. While walking among the Hindu villages, I would ask residents there why they had not become Christians, since they had already heard about Christ from previous missionaries. Their invariable answer was that they followed Mahatma Gandhi as their spiritual guru, and when he himself was asked why he did not become a Christian, he would say, “I do not find Christ in the Christian community.”

This gave me more food for thought, particularly because I personally had a strong admiration for Gandhi. I regarded him as the most truly Christ-like person I knew. Although I had not met him, he was still alive when I arrived in India, and I followed closely his Satyagraha Movement of non-violent, unconditional, Christ-like love. While in India, I also found myself in the midst of the dreadful mutual killing of thousands of Hindus and Muslims in 1947, at a time when India was receiving its independence from England.

This was a killing that could well have been avoided if Gandhi's plan for a single united nation of India had been accepted. Due, however, to Mohammad Ali Jinnah and his Muslim's party successful demand from England for a separate independent Muslim state to be carved out of the Indian subcontinent, the ensuing dislocation of people throughout the country became a nightmarish disaster. Witnessing this episode gave me still more food for thought. I realized how Christianity, as commonly practiced, was not the only religion that advocated violence, hatred and wars. Here were two groups of people—Hindus and Muslims—fighting and killing each other for no other reason than that each believed in a different religion. I began to ask the question: why do all of the religions seem to fail in this respect? Why does each religion teach that it is separate from, and superior to all of the other religions?

After seven years in India, I was required by the rules of my religious community to take a Sabbatical. I really wanted to spend the rest of my life in India and tried to apply for citizenship there, but my superiors refused the request. After a year of preaching in churches throughout the United States, I was asked to go to Rome for three years to obtain a doctor's degree in Missionology, the science of missionary work. I went to Rome, but after one year of sheer boredom listening to aged armchair philosophers theorize about missionary activity, I begged for and received permission to return to the states.

My disappointing experience in Rome at the Pontifical College compounded my feelings of surprise and disgust, seeing the papal pomp, ceremony and riches- including the Churches use of the Swiss Guard, a standing armed soldiery. My non-violent peacemaker mentality could not come to grips with these practices. For the next five years I prepared my own course in Missionology and taught it to our student missionaries at our Foreign Mission Seminary in Washington, D.C.

In 1959 my religious community responded to a call for missionaries in Uganda, in the heart of Africa. I quickly volunteered, eager to return to missionary life. While there, I was appointed by the Bishop to be the National Director of the Catholic Relief Services Office. We were responsible for providing free food, clothing, and other supplies to help the needy all throughout the country. I remained there until 1965, when I had to return for health reasons. Back in the states, I was sent to California because the weather was considered better for my health. After serving as the Assistant Pastor at a Parish church in Burbank, I was sent to teach a religion class of high school juniors at the nearby Cabrini Academy—an all girls' school. I was begged by the Mother Superior to teach the course because three teachers had already left the class and complained the students were un-teachable.

I welcomed the challenge because I thought I knew what the problem was. The girls were a very intelligent group that were simply asking honest questions and expecting some honest answers – something that the Church often withheld. One day a girl in the class asked me the question: “Father, how can you agree with our doubts and difficulties with the Church and still remain a Catholic priest?” My promise to the girls to give them honest answers to their questions compelled me to give them this answer: “I do have a problem, as you do, with certain teachings of the church, such as deifying Jesus, its Trinity doctrine and the entire sevenfold system of sacraments.

Your question is a good one. I should not and indeed cannot, in honesty, remain any longer a priest. At this very moment, I am making a decision. I am leaving not only the Priesthood, but the Catholic Church as well.”

I then removed my plastic Roman collar, placed it on the desk in front of me and said: “I apologize if I shock any of you.” Rather than be shocked, however, the entire class came to the front of the room to embrace me, knowing I would no longer be teaching them. I begged them not to allow this decision to influence them to leave the Church. I then experienced a profound sensation of peace and joy that filled my soul at the moment of my decision to leave the Church. I left the Catholic Church in 1967 and started to investigate many other religions.

Over the next 24 years, I got married and my wife shared in my search to find the truth. In 1991, after moving to Vacaville, California, my wife and I happened to read a local newspaper article written by a Bahá'í teenager who had just returned from volunteering a year of her service at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa Israel. Her quotations from Bahá'u'lláh's writings about universal peace and world unity convinced me immediately that He was indeed what he claimed to be, the Promised Return of Christ. After meeting the Bahá'ís and going to a few firesides, my wife and I became Bahá'ís together. I now live in Evansville, Indiana and devote as much time as I can to spreading the Bahá'í teachings. ❀

A LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

Eve Mnisi ❁ Swaziland

E*ve was born on August 18, 1959 and grew up in Malkerns, Swaziland, South Africa. She became a Bahá'í in 1976.*

It was a Sunday morning and our minister, Father Francis J. Flynn, was preaching a sermon. I was sitting at the back of the church, looking at the people in the congregation. I felt sorry for them, and I wondered if these people were as troubled inside as I was, with all my questions that no priest could answer. While my mind was still clouded in thought, I felt very hot. I started sweating, my knees started shaking, and I sat down. I tried to stand up again when they were standing but all I could do was sit still. After a while it was like I heard a whispering voice say, “Stand up and go out.” There was a force pulling me, so I stood up, took my handbag, and off I went. That very day, I cried bitterly, and avoided family and friends. I did not go back to church. There is nothing in this church for me, I thought. “Who am I and why am I here?” I asked myself. That was the last time I attended services in the church.

It was like I had become a helpless child whose mind was empty and ready to be filled up with knowledge. Many questions came to my mind. Who is God? Does He really love me? If He loves me as His image why did He create the devil, Satan? Why does He allow the devil to put me in the fire if I make mistakes? Why doesn't God the Creator and forgiving Lord punish us Himself, since He made us out of love? He should, I thought, punish us, lovingly instead of delivering us to some evil-hearted creature to burn me in hell.

I could not see how the devil could compete with an All-Powerful God. The relationship between God and the devil was quite hard to fathom and in the end I couldn't make much sense out of it. In my heart of hearts, I knew something was not right. I went to see Father Francis J. Flynn about these questions that kept nagging me. I asked him these questions and he was shocked. He said, "Oh poor child, you are really spiritually sick." He prayed for me and held a special mass for me. Despite his prayers and the special mass, my condition did not improve. I went to St. Mary's at Lobomba—a distance from where I stayed—to see an old priest, Father Mndzebele. I asked him the same questions. He asked me when I had last been to confession. I told him, I had nothing to confess, but wanted answers to my questions.

"You are questioning God's wisdom," he replied harshly. "This is not allowed in the church and you must accept things as they are, my child," he thundered. "Now, let's pray to Almighty God to help your troubled soul." I went home as miserable as ever and cried the whole night.

I asked God not to leave me alone. I said, "Jesus, you have told me your sheep hears your voice. Where did I go wrong? What have I done to upset God so much as to make me feel so empty?" I cried so much that I stayed away from people, friends, and family members. They became angry with me, too. I thought about who could help me since priests had no answers to my questions. I thought of a young priest who was training in Rome, who happened to be an old friend of mine. I considered him to be a very open person so I went about trying to contact him. I first went to his parents to ask for his address. After I received his address, I wrote to him but unfortunately, the letter was returned, with a handwritten message on the back saying that he resided in Dublin, Ireland. I then had to go back to his home and ask his father—Mr. Maseko—for his new address.

I wrote to him again and was successful in reaching him. It was July. I said to him, “Dear Father, please see me when you come to Swaziland to visit your parents. It is a matter of life and death. I am hoping you can help me. Once you reach the St. Don Bosco Mission, ask one of the boys to show you to my home or call me.” He replied and said, “I will be coming home in June of next year.” I had to wait for a year for him to come and answer the many questions I had about religion.

When he finally arrived in Swaziland, I went to see him with my desk pad full of questions. When he met me, he said, “Hello, Mary Eve, what a beautiful day.” I don’t remember replying to him because I was so eager to ask him my questions. I started reading my questions to him without giving him a chance to answer. I read a few and he stopped me. “Oh dear,” he said. “You must be very unhappy indeed. It seems as if your poor soul is really undergoing a lot of suffering and pain. I am not going to answer your questions for you.” I asked him why. He said, “No human priest or person can help you. I can’t help you. All I can tell you is that you are in the process of death.” He told me that “In the face of spiritual death, don’t fight it, just lie down and die. You will rise from this death and you will become a wonderful person.” As I started crying, he hugged me like a little girl and said, “It is all right to cry. You can relieve yourself.” It was like I was dreaming, how could I die, I was not physically sick. I didn’t understand what Father Maseko was talking about.

Before we departed he told me, “Come out of yourself and move up to the spiritual world, and then you will understand what I’m talking about. It is spiritual, it is between you and God.” He then said that he had to go but that God would help me.

At that point I became even more depressed and was hurting all over. That very night, I had a very strange dream. In my dream it was raining and thundering and I was running

for shelter. The lightning was striking at me and each time it missed me it opened the earth, making a furrow. I ran for my dear life hoping the lightning would not strike me. I entered a forest and branches were torn to pieces. This lightning was aiming at me. I came to a house, which was at the end of the forest and said to myself, “Thank God I am safe at last. Let me go inside—the house is safe.”

I tried hard to open the door but before I could open it, lightning struck the house and it burst into flames. I started running again and came to a beautiful place that was surrounded with nicely cut green grass. Next to this place were two huge mountains with a path between them. On top of the mountain on my left hand side were three crosses. All three crosses were black and the middle cross was the tallest.

On the mountain to my right was a lamb sitting nicely with a flag between its front legs. On the flag was a drawing of the Greatest Name, but I didn’t know what it was at the time. Wind was blowing but the rain had stopped. The flag was moving slowly, and in front of the lamb was a book, as big as a table. I stood there looking at these things. There was a cloud in front above the path that was in front of me. I could not see where I was supposed to be going. While I was still wondering what to do, I heard a voice in the clouds saying, “Pick up that book and read it.” A man appeared dressed in a long flowing robe tied on the right shoulder, and nothing on his left shoulder. “Pick up the book,” he said again.” I tried to pick up the book but it was too heavy. I could not move it no matter how much I tried. He said to me, “Look how light this book is.” He lifted it up with two fingers. “It is as light as a feather,” he said. “You will lift it up after I have breathed a new spirit of life in you. Come closer and let me pray for you.” He raised up his hands over me, and started praying, in words I did not understand. After that I woke up.

I was disturbed and troubled by this dream. I had not been to church for almost a year now. The church friends tried

to help me but they could not understand what I was going through. So I decided to say nothing to them. Nobody could help me with this dream so I prayed and read the scriptures.

I went to see Father Flynn and told him about my dream. He started asking me why I didn't come to church anymore. I told him I did not want to upset him, so I had better not answer his question. He told me not to look at a dream as something with a message. He explained that it could be a nightmare because I had turned away from God.

At that point in my life, I began praying to God as if I expected Him to answer back to me. I told Him all my troubles and began to feel relieved for the first time in months. It was like everything was made new. I felt alive for the first time in a long time.

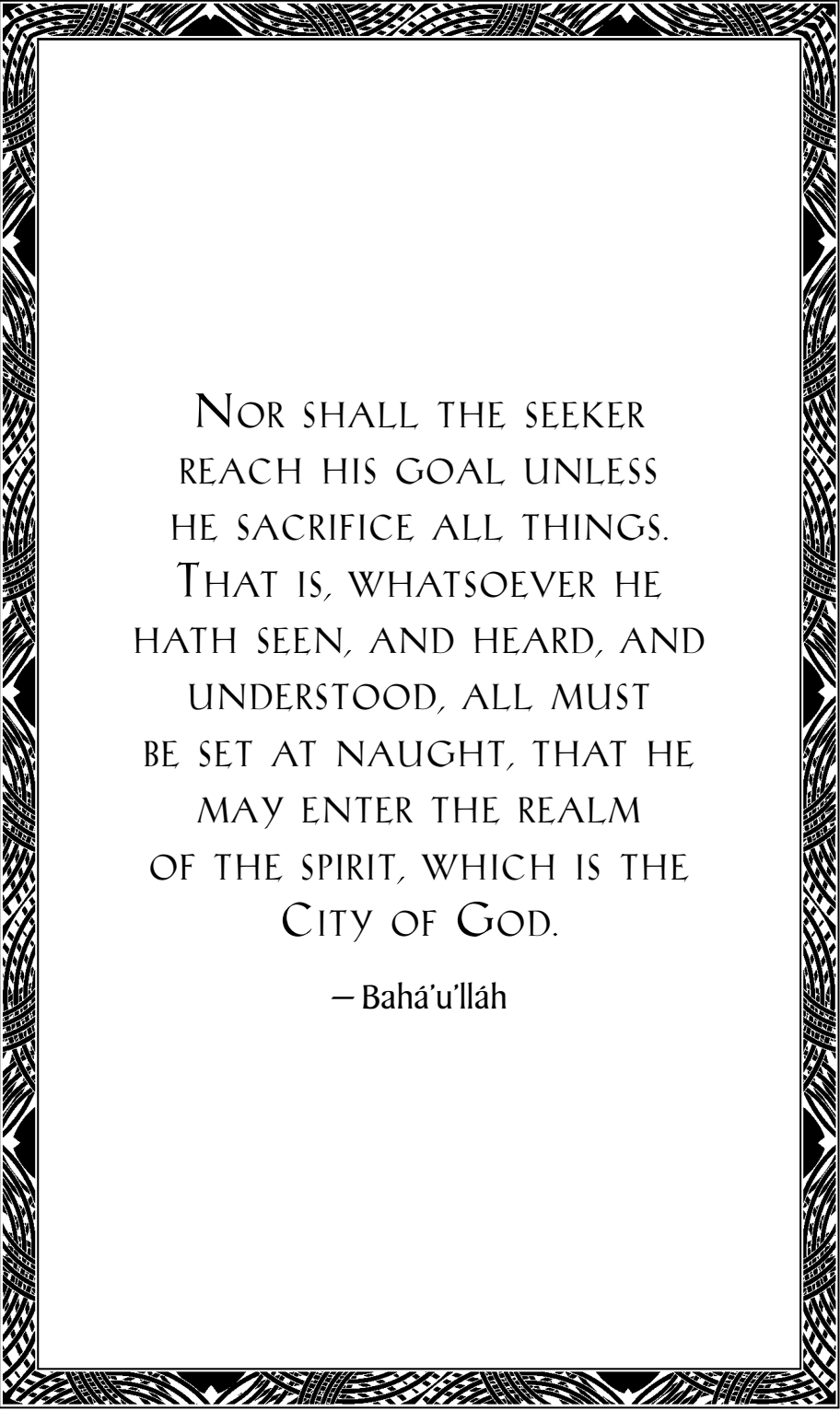
At the time, I lived between two Bahá'í families. Although I had not associated with them in the past, this time I looked at them with a different set of eyes and a new mind. I thought these people might have answers to my questions. One day I went to their devotional meeting for the first time. Since I had grown up only knowing about the discrimination that whites had inflicted on blacks, I thought that white people were not interested in associating with Africans. Most of the whites that I had contact with seemed to make fun of Africans and felt superior to us. However, I didn't let this stop me. I had questions to be answered this day. I was shocked to hear new words in prayers and in the Holy Writings they read. After asking the Bahá'ís a series of questions, they responded to each of my questions without a problem. I felt so happy in my soul. The emptiness I felt vanished. I became like a new person, after being spiritually sick for so many years. I felt that I was being blessed by God's love again. I felt His presence. This was a beginning. I went to several of the Bahá'í meetings and finally declared in 1976. After becoming a Bahá'í, I encountered more tests in my life.

Coming from a Christian background with Christ viewed as the “Son of God,” I was still under the impression that He was superior to Bahá’u’lláh. Although I liked the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh, I was not convinced that He was a mouthpiece of God in the same sense as Jesus. “Who is this man, Bahá’u’lláh?” I wondered. I started comparing Bahá’u’lláh with the earthly life of Christ thinking that Christ was better because he never married and didn’t have children. I felt a dark cloud hovering over me because I was confused about who I should be giving my loyalties to.

One day as I was reading the book *The Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh* inside a moving kombi (large taxi/small bus) from Durban to Swaziland, a funny thing happened to me. I was coming home after delivering products to my customers in South Africa. As I was sitting by the window reading the book, all of a sudden I heard what seemed to be a loud sound and saw a ball of fire. I saw it but I was not asleep! In that moment, I heard a voice telling me that He was God. I shouted out, “Oh my God” and I cried very loud, sobbing like a child. The people in the taxi were shocked because I had been quietly reading throughout the entire journey. The person next to me was very worried because the passengers in the taxi thought that he had hurt me.

“What is wrong with you, young lady? Can we help you?” one old lady asked. I shook my head, saying no. I soon came back to my senses. It was like I had taken a voyage to some other place for a few minutes and come back to the taxi. During that moment when I heard the voice and saw the ball of fire, I saw things I could not describe. I was shaking all over my body after this experience. I soon came to realize that Bahá’u’lláh in His own mysterious way had come to show me who He was. That was a spiritual turning point in my life that made me transfer all of my loyalties to Bahá’u’lláh and His divine message.

Today I am blessed to be part of the New World Order of Bahá’u’lláh. I teach Sunday school classes and serve as the secretary of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Malkems. ❀



NOR SHALL THE SEEKER
REACH HIS GOAL UNLESS
HE SACRIFICE ALL THINGS.
THAT IS, WHATSOEVER HE
HATH SEEN, AND HEARD, AND
UNDERSTOOD, ALL MUST
BE SET AT NAUGHT, THAT HE
MAY ENTER THE REALM
OF THE SPIRIT, WHICH IS THE
CITY OF GOD.

— Bahá'u'lláh

BED OF LOVE

Rennett Grovea ❁ South Afric

R*ennett lives in Johannesburg, South Africa, and works as a communications and motivation consultant. She became a Bahá'í in 1992 after reading 'Thief in the Night'.*

I was born 25 February 1958, the youngest child of three. My family is Afrikaans speaking and I live in Johannesburg, South Africa. Due to a progressive neurological disease, Spinal Muscular Atrophy, I have lived my life from a wheelchair. Since a very early age, God has been at the center of my world. In fact, I always felt that I was able to communicate with the Universal Life Force. Formal prayer, as well as constant thoughts about God and discussions with God, has always been natural for me. There have been times, however, when I could not pray or when I have felt cut off from God. But these have been the exceptions rather than the rule.

I grew up in a charismatic Christian home and up until my early teens my family was very involved in the church. I was a very committed Christian and found my spiritual life growing and developing constantly. But it always felt like something was missing from my life.

My brother Vickie, who was three years older than me, was my mentor. Like myself, my brother was also diagnosed with Spinal Muscular Atrophy, but he was much more fragile than I and died as a result of pneumonia at age 29. Doctors said both my brother and I would not live past our teens and we both felt a sense of urgency to do all we could

in a short period of time. Vickie taught me to be curious and he introduced me to reading material on all sorts of religions and philosophies.

He was a phenomenal man and when he left this earthly plane in 1984, I felt my world fall apart because all I had worked for, dreamed about, or set out to achieve had originated with him. Living with Vickie was stimulating and exciting and suddenly he was gone. I had to turn elsewhere for inspiration, motivation, and guidance. Vickie had always been an anchor in my life and someone who could get me out of any situation. I believe that with his death I was faced with my first lesson in detachment from all else save God.

Following my brother's death, I spent a great deal of time during the next few months praying. One night at midnight, I awoke and the idea to start a training company flooded my mind. The next morning I started writing my first course and my company Dynamic Telephone Communication was born. I saw it as a gift from God. Even though I had no formal training to start the company, for the next 14 years the business just developed as if it had a life of its own. There is no way I could have caused this company to prosper, based on my limited physical abilities and my lack of knowledge of business and the training industry. Prior to entering the training field, I had studied psychology and sociology and I worked as a representative in the Life Insurance Industry. I had also worked in the Telemarketing field and ran a printing business with my brother. But this was the only experience I had that could have assisted me with the new venture. I believe all the rest was given through God's grace because, for whatever reason, this was to be a very important part of my life.

One of the most important blessings that came from my business activities was that two of my clients became very dear friends to me. These friends, Celia Beumont and Charlie Grindley, were Bahá'ís and eventually told me a little

bit about the Bahá'í Faith. They gave me various books to read but my heart was closed at the time. Based on what they told me, I expressed the thought that the Faith might be the work of the Antichrist.

On 12 June 1992, I was traveling by car from Johannesburg to Durban on a business trip. It was a long journey and because I was disabled and could not drive, decided to use the time to relax and listen to a tape by J.R.R. Tolkien reading from *Lord of the Rings*. I have had so much pleasure from Tolkien's work and was reminded on this trip as we drove through the province where he was born. Had he still been alive, he would have been 100 years old that year. On June 13th of that same year, Celia gave me the book *Thief in the Night* written by Hand of the Cause William Sears. The first thought that crossed my mind when I fearfully paged through *Thief in the Night* was that Tolkien had been born in 1892, the exact same year that Bahá'u'lláh, the prophet-founder of the Bahá'í Faith left this mortal world. The year 1892 was one of the small coincidences that captured my attention that day and spurred me on to read the writings of Bahá'u'lláh in the book, 'Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh.' I was lost in the desert and my thirst was only quenched by reading more and more about the prophecies in the Bible concerning Bahá'u'lláh. As the Holy Writings seeped into my heart, I recognized Bahá'u'lláh as the Promise of All Ages. It still feels like a miracle for me that despite my stubbornness, God continued exposing me to His Cause and even used my love for a literary work to open my eyes and grant me the incredible privilege of accepting the Faith.

For my family and friends, my acceptance of the Faith was devastating. I was called "the devil." I was told I had placed a curse on our family and I was also told, "heaven would be a lonely place" without me. I used the prayers for detachment and I became mesmerized by the concepts of

unity in diversity and consultation. I looked forward to belonging to my new spiritual family who I thought would surely accept me for who I was and not for how I looked or what I did. This did not happen. I found I could very seldom attend community functions or Feasts because these were usually held in the evenings. Since my parents and I lived together and they assisted in my physical care, it meant they had to wait up to put me to bed and this caused disunity in our home. Even my telephone contacts with the friends made my family very uncomfortable. I became more and more frustrated as all and any attempts I made to serve the Cause or teach never bore fruit. What is significant though is, spurred on by my love of Bahá'u'lláh, I never gave up trying to stay connected to the community and with God.

In 1997, I began experiencing intense episodes of anger. I kept saying to God that I had had enough of battling and struggling each and every day. I moaned at Him that just as I thought I had learnt a lesson, WHAM, bigger mountains were thrown in my path. I wanted to die. I could not face the physical pain, the financial hardships, and the loneliness anymore. I had never questioned why things were so difficult, and even then the reasons that had kept me going were still a part of my belief system. But now I was just plain sick of it all. I complained constantly that I could not serve the Bahá'í Faith because of all my physical limitations. I consulted with Bahá'í friends, I prayed, I used all the techniques that had worked so well before. However, I just sank deeper and deeper into depression. I told God I wanted out. Well, He did bring a huge change, but not what I had expected.

In January 1998 it became obvious that I had developed an additional serious neurological problem. Late in January 1998 I had a severe chest infection. A few days after my recovery, I suddenly experienced, for the first time in my life, severe contractions or spasms in my chest area. The spasms arched my entire chest and back area. I was given

medication for neuralgia and about three days later I experienced severe spasms in my face, arms, hands, and upper body. I was hospitalized for most of 1998. Due to ineffective medical care and over-medication as well as a neck operation, I was in intensive care for a lengthy period and for most of that time I was not fully conscious. As a result, my family was forced to close my office premises and all the equipment owned by my company, Dynamic Telephone Communications, was sold to pay staff salaries.

My life was suddenly at the very worst place it had ever been. I was drugged so badly that my intellectual abilities were severely impaired. I was in deep financial debt and the prospect of earning an income appeared very remote. I was in unbearable physical pain and my body could not handle the regular spasms or convulsions. I asked God to take me home. I spent a whole night praying to die. I fell asleep at about 5 am and when I awoke 2 hours later, I realized that God always answers prayers and His answer was quite clearly “no.” I recommitted myself to the Bahá’í Faith and to serving Him and slowly but surely “the peace that passes all understanding” became a reality for me. Joy bubbles out of me now on an ongoing basis. I always tried to live one day at a time but now I am truly dealing only with each day and each situation separately while keeping my eye on the big picture .

The company God loaned me has been dormant since early 1998 and I no longer have staff to assist. I still have to spend the majority of my time in bed because of the extreme pain I experience when being moved to and from my bed and wheelchair. Yet I experienced another miracle as a result of a magazine article about my life. A Christian couple designed a computer system named Slingshot for me to use so that I could do business and communicate with people from my bed. Like the slingshot used by King David, it has helped to topple many seemingly impossible barriers and opened up the way for me to get more out of life. These

friends, a committed Christian couple, say God led them to make the computer and other facilities available. Through God's grace and mercy, and their actions, instead of being isolated from society, I was able to conduct business, socialize, work on community projects, and communicate with people from all over the world.

Slingshot led me to a group of followers of the Bahá'í Faith in Europe. Last year this group of Bahá'ís collected money to buy me a bed that has a backrest that can be raised so I am now able to sit up in bed. Only when you have been lying flat on your back (day in and day out, week in and week out) from 5:30 am in the morning till 8:00 pm at night without being able to lift your head, will you be able to understand the joy of being in an upright position. Through God's grace and mercy the actions of a group of people who only knew me through e-mail, I am able to appreciate the view of my garden outside my bedroom window. I am also able to watch my dogs and my great nephew playing on the carpet next to my "Bed of Love". Now there is more dignity when receiving visitors in my bedroom, especially if the meetings are work related.

Notwithstanding the great support I was given by many of my Bahá'í friends, my hands eventually became too weak to type or use a computer. Realizing the adversity I was facing, this wonderful group of souls bought me a sophisticated software system that allows me to talk without using the keyboard.

It is not possible for me to comprehend why I have experienced such love. I am undeserving and certainly there are people in much greater need than I. What God has assisted me to understand, however, is that humanity is nearing maturity. All the acts of kindness, obedience, courage, and sacrifice that are taking place throughout the world are steps on the road to the New Jerusalem. ❀

TURNED BACK TO GOD

Charles Duncan ❁ USA

Born and raised in Sacramento, California, Charles became a Bahá'í in 1949 and has pioneered all over the world. He is a Knight of Bahá'u'lláh and has pioneered to Thailand, Burma, Korea, and Japan. He is currently pioneering in China.

It is hard to know just where in my background things started to prepare me for my acceptance of the Bahá'í Faith. But looking back on it now, the first influence must have been the neighborhood that I grew up in. We moved there when I was less than a year old. This neighborhood in just a little more than a block in each of the four directions included the Duccinis, an Italian family; the Pixiotos, a Portuguese family; the Soligans, an Armenian family; the Zampathoses, a Greek family; and the Wilsons, the Slaughters, the Williams, the Crawfords, and the Orrs. These last five were African American families, as well as my own, and all the rest of the people in our neighborhood were various mixtures of white Americans. The children from these families grew up together, played together, and went to school together. Each of these families was aware of its own ethnic background and they were often bilingual. So you could say that I was raised believing in the oneness of mankind by immersion.

My family and the Slaughters were the only ones that went to Sunday school regularly. Richard Duccini used to wear some medals on a string around his neck, which he would show us sometimes and then kiss them. I think my

first thought about metaphysics happened one day when we were sitting around talking. The idea of falling off the earth and floating in outer space came up in our conversation. Someone said that such a person would float forever. He would never stop. That was my first idea of “forever.” It scared me a little. I had heard about death already. I knew that we all would “go to sleep and never wake up,” but that didn’t seem so final as floating forever. All of this was on an absorption level. I wasn’t conscious of being profound. I didn’t give any of it much thought except for the man floating in outer space.

Then at about the age of seven or eight, a movie came out that was the first of a series of experiences that changed my life. It was a Cecil B. DeMille picture called “The Crusades.” I had never before heard of the Crusades, “Mohammedans,” or infidels, but the movie left a profound effect on my psyche. I remember one scene in particular where Richard the Lionhearted was talking to the leader of the Muslims. The Muslim king said, “Why must we fight? We both believe in the same God.” Richard answered, “Because we believe in Jesus Christ and you don’t.” The other king said, “We believe in Jesus as a Prophet from God. But we do not believe that He was the Son of God.” This scene made a vivid impression on my young mind. Later when I heard that people knelt in front of images of Buddha, I thought in my naïve way. “Maybe God, Allah, and Buddha are all the same person.” So the way was prepared in my mind for the oneness of religion. Years later when I was fifteen years old, my piano teacher, Florence D. Keemer, invited me to attend the Geyserville Summer School for a week. My father agreed that I could go and Mrs. Keemer told him that there would be some religious teaching there. That was fine. I always went to Sunday school. On the drive to Geyserville from Sacramento, Mrs. Keemer and Johnny Eichenhauer and his younger brother told me about the

Bahá'í Faith. No problem. I accepted it all. I knew instantly that it was true. Allah was God. Muhammad and Jesus were prophets and there was a new Prophet who taught very wise things to unite the world.

One of the first lectures I heard at the Summer School was one given by Marzieh Gail on the prophet Muhammad. I nearly floated out of the lecture hall I was so elated. Here was everything that I knew was true! On returning home after summer school, I told all of my relatives and friends about the Bahá'í Faith. Everyone sort of laughed at me for being so gullible. I went to a few firesides and read Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era and The Hidden Words. I had a small Bahá'í prayer book that I used to say prayers. But I did not become a Bahá'í right away. Part of it had to do with the disputes I had with Mrs. Keemer about the music she was teaching me.

I soon lost interest in the Bahá'í Faith because nobody was around to fan the sparks. I went on to high school and acquired an intense interest in philosophy. I subsequently became an atheist. Although I claimed to have stopped believing in God or religion, I clung onto other teachings like the equality of the sexes, the oneness of mankind, a World Tribunal, a universal monetary system, and a universal language.

Many years later, I was walking in an unfamiliar part of San Francisco with two friends. We passed a jewelry shop and I saw a white model of the Bahá'í House of Worship in the window. I recognized it immediately. I was both surprised and very pleased. My friends were not interested. Not long afterwards, I was doing some garden work for a neighbor and feeling very sorry for myself because of an unsuccessful love affair. I recited a phrase that I sometimes used to say when I felt bad: "It's enough to turn you back to God." Usually when I said it, I would laugh and feel much

better. But this time, I didn't laugh. I felt something hit me in the middle of my chest as if God had suddenly thumped me there. Suddenly I "knew" that my days of atheism were over. I tried to fight back with arguments about why I should be an atheist and couldn't believe in God. All of the "right" answers had already been taught to me by Mrs. Keemer and Marzieh Gail. By the time I had finished my work in the garden, I knew that I would become a Bahá'í soon. I went down to the local used bookshop and bought a copy of Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era and read it again. Then I read all of the Bahá'í books in the University of California library (there weren't so many available then).

After getting in touch with the Bahá'ís in Berkeley, I signed my card six weeks later in front of the Local Spiritual Assembly of Berkeley. That was on February 24, 1949. A few years later, when Shoghi Effendi announced the need for pioneers to travel to other countries and promote the Faith, I decided to pioneer to Brunei. After that I lived in Thailand, Laos, Taiwan, South Korea, Hong Kong, Macau, Japan, and I now live in China. ❀

AT LAST

Estella Perkins ✿ USA

Estella was born in Indianapolis, Indiana on April 3, 1949. She left Indiana to attend college and did not return to her home until almost 30 years later. She became a Bahá'í on March 1, 2000, and currently works as a Project Expeditor for Alps Construction in Chicago.

My story is simply about tough times, some hopelessness, and overcoming the big hurdle of being a card-carrying atheist to joyously believing in God.

As the daughter of a minister, I grew up in the rich religious tradition that so many African Americans share. Truly, the belief in God carried us through the most debasing of suffering—slavery and its ongoing oppression.

However, at an early age in the 1950s and 60s, I earned “head thumping” smacks for asking impertinent questions like “If white people are bad, then why are we worshipping that white man?”

I would always get a hard and fast answer like “He’s Jesus, our Lord and Savior!” When I would dig a little deeper and ask the question, “Oh yeah, then why did his followers enslave us and treat us so terribly?” I would usually get pummeled verbally and on some occasions physically smacked upside my head. I decided after getting assaulted so much, I would not make the same mistake. I kept my mouth shut.

But since I was such a slow learner, I kept asking other questions that got me into deeper trouble; such as, “How come Jesus is only going to save those in our church and not anybody else?” It didn’t make sense to me that God would condemn millions of people all over the world to hell for not believing in Christ.

I was always told, “Straight and narrow is the way, and few are those who find it!” Behind those replies would come thumps, pinches, and smacks. I was forced to keep quiet. In spite of my difficulty in accepting Jesus, my parents thankfully were able to instill in me some good basic values about working hard, caring and respecting others, and striving to be humble.

Due to the fact that my father would not let me eat unless I could say a Biblical verse, I learned quite a bit about the Bible. Although he was serious about me learning the Bible, he loved me very much. This love later in life brought me through many a troubled time and ultimately to God.

As a child of the sixties, I was a “wild thing.” I got involved in the women’s liberation movement, the Black Power syndicates, and was against “the establishment”. I was in the thick of everything that was counter to the status quo. During a campus protest that I was heavily involved in, my mother spotted me on television. At the time, I had a long bushy Afro with African beads around my neck, arms, and ankles, and was dressed in a short mini-skirt, with no shoes on. My mother could not believe her eyes. She told me, “It’s a good thing your father only watches channel 8, ‘Miss Thing.’ I think you had better have some good grades by the time he gets your report card.” At the time, God was not a part of my life.

So, I lived a very carefree life. After college, I worked and partied hard. One of my jobs in the early 70’s was at the RCA facility in Bloomington, Indiana, where I came to

know a guy by the name of Freddie Stewart. Freddy really stood out in contrast because he was black in an overwhelmingly white workplace. And because of his patient, warm, gracious, and caring manner, I soon became fast friends with him, even though he was old enough to be my father.

I was hired as part of a program to bring women into middle management. While I encountered a lot of resistance from the many men who were already in management, I wasn't too fazed by the competition because I grew up with six brothers who taught me how to rumble. Freddy, on the other hand, was the ever-calming force, the peacemaker who taught me how to relax. I learned so many good lessons from him.

The most important thing I learned from him was about the Bahá'í Faith. He taught me about its central teachings—the oneness of God, the oneness of all religions, and the oneness of humanity. He told me that he held a fireside every Friday night at this house and invited me to come. I told him, “It sounds really cool Freddy, but Friday is my party night and I gots to party, bro!” I never went to Freddy's fireside.

I was on a course to achieve nothing and enjoy all the sin I could. Later, I transferred to Indianapolis and met my first husband, a white man who hated God more than I did. We became card-carrying atheists. I later joined Madalyn Murr a y O'Hare's group, went to atheist camps, and even met her. I have to admit that I did not find her to be a very pleasant person. But most of the atheists we met were warm, caring people seeking refuge from the jumble of organized religion.

For over twenty years I was a closet atheist, living in the Bible belt. My first husband and I parted as friends. I soon traveled for a while, did a short stay in the military, and eventually returned to my native Indianapolis. Here I did quite a bit of community work, assisted troubled teens and appeared to be mellowing into middle age.

During this time I married a man I knew from college. This marriage became one of torment and pain. While I thought he had matured and changed he was still doing drugs and partying as much as he could. I gave up my house, career, and basically life because I thought in my arrogance that love was all that he and I needed.

A year following the end of this marriage, another college friend that had been wanting to marry me resurfaced. He was seriously handicapped having use of only his hands and his mind. He convinced me to relocate to Bloomington, Indiana. Because he was very well off he could provide for us both, all I needed to do was to marry and take care of him.

After marrying him, I found that he and his former “live-in” whom he would not marry were merely playing games with me. She never really left him and continued to come over almost everyday. I decided to treat the situation as I would any job; I worked hard keeping him and the house spotless. When he told me that she would be moving back, that the three of us could be one happy family, this was beyond what I could stand.

I firmly believed that the spirits of my parents were with me. I rented a van and single-handedly moved my furniture by myself, praying that I would not hurt myself. Although it was January in the depth of winter, I somehow managed to move all of my things to my niece’s house.

Nearly broke and sleeping on my niece’s floor, I remembered Freddy and the Bahá’ís from my old neighborhood. I contacted them and they invited me to attend what I know now was a Holy Day celebration. I loved the readings that I thought were poetry, and was impressed with the spirit of the teachings. However, my niece began to criticize me for my interest in the Bahá’í Faith and did not want me to have anything to do with it.

At this point my soul was in pain and I really needed spiritual help. I decided that I could no longer bear this weight alone. Truly humbled, I called the Bahá'í Center and asked if the class they advertised in a local paper was still being offered. A warm, happy voice responded, "Yes!"

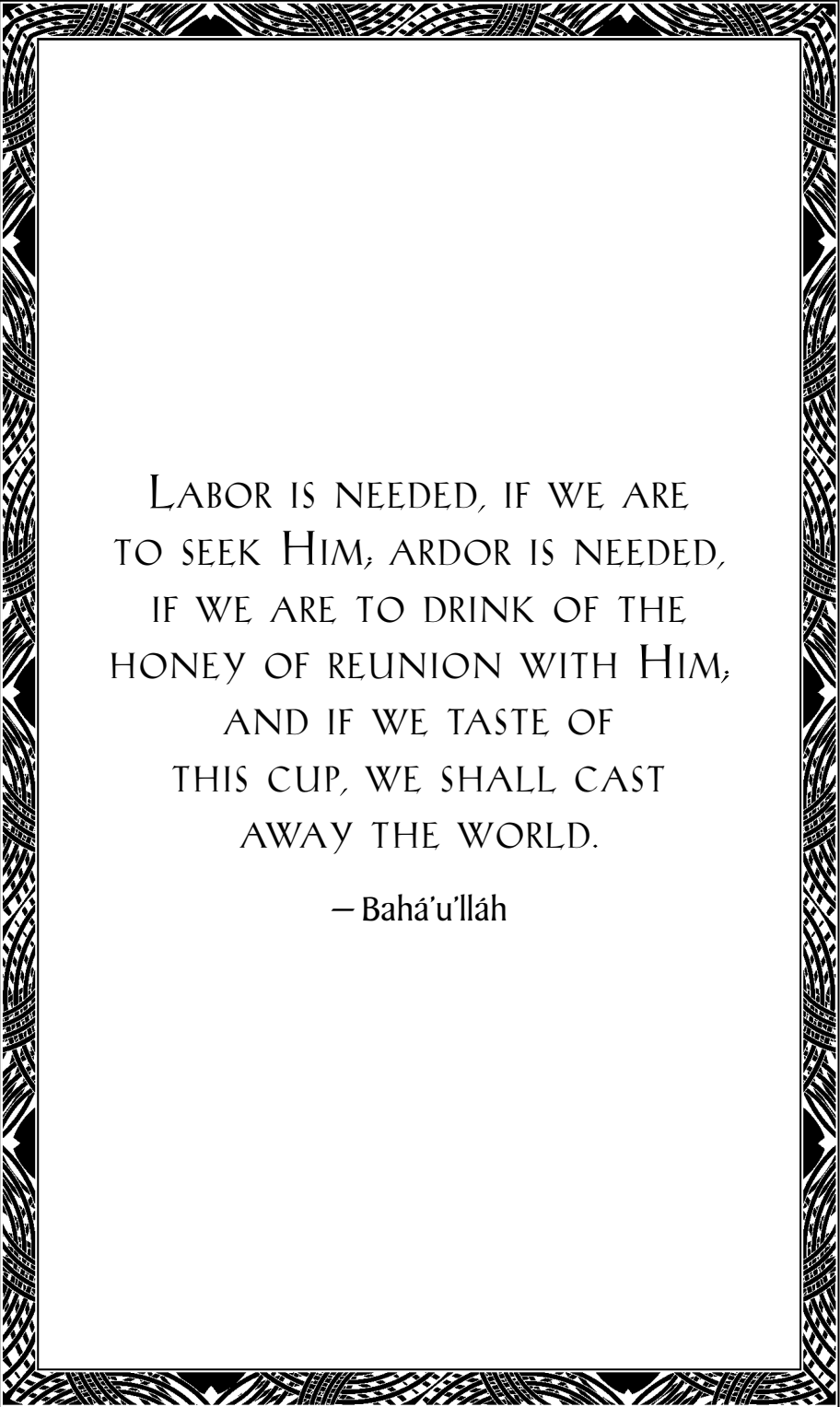
I attended the Appleseed Institute held by the Indianapolis Bahá'ís and studied with Gary Peterson and Phyllis Rapiet. This was a very loving community. I attended everything and read everything they gave me. But I was a very slow learner. It never dawned on me to ask how to become a Bahá'í.

Finally, in a sweet and loving manner, Gary invited me to join the Bahá'í Faith. It was a night I shall never forget. It was the night before the first day of the Fast, but I was ready. Everyone signed a prayer book for me and then joined hands and sang with feeling "Allah-u-Abhá" for me. I felt like a sinner who had at last found God.

After becoming a Bahá'í I decided to call Freddy and tell him about my declaration. The electric moment on the phone was when I asked if he still held his Friday fireside. And again the response was a warm and happy, "Yes!"

So after 20 years of avoiding his firesides, I drove as straight as an arrow to Freddy's house, met his wonderful wife, Claudia, his two beautiful sons, Joe and Khalil, and members of the Bloomington community.

After dedicating my life to Bahá'u'lláh, my niece who used to be so scornful of the Bahá'í Faith, is now thinking of also becoming a Bahá'í. ❀



LABOR IS NEEDED, IF WE ARE
TO SEEK HIM, ARDOR IS NEEDED,
IF WE ARE TO DRINK OF THE
HONEY OF REUNION WITH HIM,
AND IF WE TASTE OF
THIS CUP, WE SHALL CAST
AWAY THE WORLD.

— Bahá'u'lláh

DANIEL'S WORDS RING TRUE

Miguel Watler ❁ Canada

M*iguel was born and raised in Canada. She heard about the Bahá'í Faith from a friend at the University of Saskatoon. After reading the Kitáb-i-Iqán (the Book of Certitude), she became a Bahá'í in 1986.*

I first heard of the Bahá'í Faith in the early 1980s during the time of the persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran. I was living in Canada at the time, and I heard of the Faith through the CBC national news. I was very impressed because it seemed to me that not only were the Bahá'ís the only religious group in the Middle East which was not resorting to some kind of Holy War, but that, according to the news reporter, they were trying to unite the religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Now I see that the Bahá'í Faith is a lot more than that, but at the time, I was left with the impression that the Bahá'ís were the true Christians of today, kind of like the early Christians in the first and second centuries A.D.

I didn't hear of the Faith again until 1986 when a friend at the University of Saskatoon told me she was a Bahá'í. I was shocked because she was French-Canadian, and I had thought that the Bahá'í Faith was only for Iranian people, and that it belonged in the Middle East. She said no, it is for the whole world. Anyway, she introduced me to the Faith, and I really didn't listen. The only thing I wanted to know was what does the Bahá'í Faith teach about the return of Christ.

When I was about 4, my Dad told me that one day Christ would return, and that He would return in the clouds

of glory, that the sun would be darkened, that the moon would stop giving its light, that the stars would fall from the heaven, and that He would return in the clouds of heaven with great power and glory. So every evening, I would go outside and look into the sky, waiting for Jesus to return in the clouds of heaven. I forgot about it after a few weeks when He didn't return this way.

So I asked my French-Canadian friend, what do Bahá'ís teach about the return of Christ. She said that Bahá'ís believe that Christ has returned and His new name is Bahá'u'lláh (Arabic for Glory of God), and that Bahá'u'lláh was the Promised One of all religions, not just Christianity. Needless to say, I thought she was nuts, and I was very angry. All of the missionaries who had come by had basically agreed with me on this point that Christ will return someday, but had not yet actually returned. She left me some books, which I threw up on the shelf, beside my Qu'ran and Book of Mormon. I didn't touch them until the following week, when out of curiosity, I decided to open one and start reading.

This was the book by Hatcher and Martin, called *The Bahá'í Faith: The Emerging Global Religion*. It was an excellent book. As I read it, I felt I needed this religion. Christianity had done me well, but I felt like I outgrew it. At this point in my life there were many questions that Christianity could not answer. I also found the principles and laws of the Bahá'í Faith to be very appealing. However, I felt that the claim that Bahá'u'lláh about being the return of Christ was not true. Apart from the station that He claimed for Himself, I thought, at that time, that the Bahá'í Faith was a good religion.

I moved from Saskatoon to Kingston, and went to a public meeting organized at Queen's University. This was the first time I met a group of Bahá'ís together. I was shocked. I saw a Jamaican man, an East Indian lady, white and black.. and they didn't seem to notice that they were all different, or

perhaps that they seemed rather used to it. I couldn't believe that all these people believed that Bahá'u'lláh was the return of Christ. After the talk, I went to the main speaker, and asked him privately, "Do you really believe that Bahá'u'lláh is the return of Jesus Christ?" He said, "Yes."

"That is a hard teaching," I replied, and then remembered that this very sentence appeared in the New Testament, said by someone who was rejecting Christ. This really worried me, because I was starting to feel on the wrong side of things. I whispered privately to my friend at this meeting, who was also interested in the Faith, "I'm not coming to any more of their meetings until I figure this thing out. We can't go hanging around people who believe Bahá'u'lláh is the return of Christ. . . . What? They're inviting us to Pizza Hut? I love Pizza Hut! Let's go! But after this, I am going to figure out whether to join them or to fight them."

I started to read *Some Answered Questions* by 'Abdu'l-Bahá (recommended to me by my French Canadian friend who was still corresponding through snail mail) for two reasons really. One, at the church which I was going to there were a lot of arguments about the meaning of the Holy Scriptures, and I thought that what 'Abdu'l-Bahá said on Christian subjects was simple and plain and correct. So, I showed it to them and of course, they would not touch it.

The second reason was Bible prophecies relating to Bahá'u'lláh and also to Islam. This was really fascinating. Jesus had referred His disciples to Daniel in "When ye therefore shall see the abomination of desolation spoken by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place (whoso readeth, let him understand)." And Daniel had said that the sanctuary would be trodden under foot for 2300 days, which in prophecy actually means 2300 years. 2300 years from that time brings us to the year 1844 AD, the year that the Báb declared His mission in Shiraz, Persia. In Revelations, chapter 11, there is another prophecy relating

to the passage of 1260 days, which actually means 1260 years. In the Islamic calendar, 1260 AH is the same as the year 1844 in the Christian calendar. It was a good piece of mathematics, but it still didn't convince me.

The next time that I went to the church was for a study in Biblical prophecy, and can you imagine how I felt when, as I walked into the church basement, I saw the year 1844 written in large letters on the blackboard. I wanted to jump up and say to the teacher, "Hey, I know what that really means." But I sat quiet. I knew that they did not like Some Answered Questions. The teacher said something to the effect that in this year, Christ was expected to return, but hadn't, which meant that the understanding of the scriptures at that time was wrong, and that in heaven something else was going on, but Christ will return soon anyway.

I really started to believe in the Bahá'í Faith at this point, simply because I knew too much about it. I had accepted that Bahá'u'lláh was not an ordinary human being, but I was confused regarding the Christian prophecies, and how they related to Him. Particularly that the sun would be darkened, the moon would stop giving its light, that the stars would fall from the heaven, and that He would return in the clouds of heaven with great power and glory. Not to mention the Resurrection, the Day of Judgment, the end of the world, and building the Kingdom of God on earth.

The next Bahá'í book that I read was the *Kitab-I-Iqan* (Book of Certitude), and I felt, as I read it, that Bahá'u'lláh was talking directly to me. One by one, the barriers were removed, but the power and style of the writing was what truly overwhelmed me. Shortly after that I declared myself a Bahá'í. Needless to say, my family thought I was nuts, and they were angry about my decision. However, over the years, they have grown to accept my religious identity as a Bahá'í, and are no longer angry with me. ❀

THEN CAME THE VOICE

Vinson D. Poole ❁ USA

Vinson was born in Washington, D.C., and graduated from Calvin Coolidge High School. He later earned an Associate Degree in Applied Science and Environmental Science Technology. He currently resides in Atlanta with his wife Mary and works at a Laboratory Director in Operations Management.

My quest for truth began at a relatively early age. While I have recollections of my mother carrying me to church on several occasions when I was, perhaps, five or six years old, usually she just could not find the time after working two or three jobs, caring for her four children and attending to household chores. Still, she was a spiritual and caring person. She prayed regularly and always encouraged me to pray and to ask God for forgiveness of my sins. On the other hand, my father—a self-described Deist—had no use for churches or any organized religion. He would say, “The world is my church and nature my bible. Everything I need to know about God I can learn by observing nature.” His two favorite books, which he read and quoted from often, were *Age of Reason* by Thomas Paine and Kahlil Gibran’s *The Prophet*. As for me, I tended to share my father’s philosophy. In fact, the first time I read *Age of Reason* I felt as if someone had gotten inside my mind, organized my thoughts, and wrote them into that book. So strongly did I

feel about this, that I even wondered if I might be the reincarnation of Thomas Paine—I was eleven.

I did join a Baptist church at one point in my youth, but I could not reconcile in my mind the love and acceptance that Jesus taught on the one hand, with the intolerance and divisiveness I heard being preached on the other. Nor could I accept the doctrine that the vast majority of the world's population was “lost” because they were not Christians, despite the fact that they had and adhered to their own beautiful religions. In many cases, they may not have even heard of Jesus Christ. So I left the church, and Christianity—at least as I found it being taught and practiced.

Over the next several years, my deistic views evolved into a world embracing theism. I never did agree with my father's assertion that Jesus was not of Divine origin, but rather a man like all others who happened to be very close to God. And what of those Holy Souls who established the other great religions of the world both past and present? Might they not have also been God's messengers? The search was on.

It was about this time, as a senior in Calvin Coolidge High School in Washington, D.C., that I picked up the *Ebony* magazine that had just been delivered to our home and was immediately struck by the word “Bahá'í” on the cover. The word captivated me. I turned to the article on the Bahá'í Faith written by Lerome Bennett and, as Yogi Berra said, it was “*déjà vu* all over again.” Once again someone had managed to crawl inside my brain, scoop up my fragmented thoughts on religion and write about them, only this time they were not the expressions of a defunct philosophical movement. This time they were the teachings of another man, Bahá'u'lláh, claiming to speak with the authority of God—another Jesus, another Moses, and another Buddha. This time I discovered that there was

actually a religion whose millions of adherents shared my thoughts and beliefs. And that name—Bahá'í—there was something mystical about it. I just couldn't stop staring at it and pronouncing it over and over. Was this the faith I had been searching for?

These were troubling times. President Kennedy had been assassinated less than two years before and the world was being torn apart by the Vietnam War. I wrote to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States asking if, in light of their quest for world peace, they would call for an International Day of Prayer for Peace. I received a swift and cordial reply: something to the effect that Bahá'ís work for world peace everyday.

It so happened that I had to give a report on a topic of my choice in my Social Studies class. I asked if I could report on the Bahá'í Faith. It turned out that my Social Studies teacher, Mrs. Widutis, was acquainted with a Bahá'í. She not only approved of the subject of my report, but also told me that there was a Bahá'í center on 16th street, not far from my house where I could get more information. I visited the center, spoke briefly with a lady there and returned home with some pamphlets on the Faith. My report to the class was well received, but when asked if I was a Bahá'í, I had to reply “No.” Even though I agreed with most of the teachings of the Faith, there were one or two things I just couldn't go along with. Mainly it was the total abstinence from alcoholic drinks. I believed that moderation was the key and that if I could not subscribe to all the tenets of a faith, I could not in good conscience call myself a member of that faith. Still, I felt extremely close to the faith of Bahá'u'lláh, and from that time on whenever I studied a different faith, I always compared it to Bahá'í, and Bahá'í always came out on top in my mind. When I enlisted in the U.S. Navy shortly thereafter, I was asked my religion. “I don't belong to any particular

religion,” I told the Recruitment Officer. He insisted he had to put some religion on his form, so I said, “Put Bahá’í.”

“What’s that,” he asked. “Protestant or what?”

“No,” I replied. “It’s an independent world religion.”

The Officer was baffled. Bahá’í was not one of the choices on his form. He checked “Protestant.”

To the best of my knowledge, I had no further contact with Bahá’ís until about nine years later. By then, I was married with children and living in Flint, Michigan. My wife, Mary, was raised in a devout Christian family. To her, the fact that I still had not accepted any organized religion was tantamount to being an atheist. Needless to say, she spent many hours praying for my salvation. In December 1973, I got a job with IBM and one month later found myself in Chicago for a three-month IBM training program. From my earlier study of the Faith, I knew that the Bahá’í House of Worship was located just north of Chicago in Wilmette, Illinois, and planned to visit it some weekend during my stay in Chicago. However, being the procrastinator that I was, two and one-half months passed and I still had not taken the time to make the short trip to Wilmette. By this time, I had decided I would visit the House of Worship on my next trip to Chicago. But, I guess Bahá’u’lláh had other plans

One evening, about two weeks before the end of my class, I retired to bed. Moments later, still awake, I heard a very clear voice say. “Mary has been praying for you and I have come to answer her prayer.” The male-sounding voice seemed to come from the foot of my bed, but I saw no one. The remainder of the message came not as an audible voice but as an internal one. It told me that I must visit the Bahá’í House of Worship before leaving Chicago and that what I

was to find there, I was to take home to Mary to help her as she had helped me.

That weekend I hopped on the public transit system and traveled north to the end of the line—Wilmette. I could not see the House of Worship from the train station but as I walked toward it, suddenly the magnificent structure leapt into sight from behind the trees lining the street. I was awestruck. I felt as if I was returning home after a long, long journey. But the journey was not yet completed. I still had questions. The alcohol, remember? I was invited to attend a wedding in progress in Foundation Hall—a beautiful simple ceremony. Then I studied the exhibits and perused the bookstore. But I knew that I was not there as a tourist, so I walked up to the auditorium, seated myself in the middle, gazed about while soaking in the beauty and sacredness of the setting, then prayed and meditated on why I was there and why the prohibition of alcohol. After about twenty minutes, I suddenly came to the realization that I believed Bahá'u'lláh and who He claimed to be; namely the messenger of God for this day. Also, I reasoned that His teachings are of God, and whether I understood them or not, they must be followed. At that instant, it was as if a veil was lifted from before my eyes and I knew I had to become a Bahá'í. ❀

FLOWER CHILD

Diane Tufts ❁ USA

D*iane was a “flower child” from the 60s and discovered the Bahá’í Faith on Maui Island in Hawaii. She became a Bahá’í in 1969. She currently resides in Washougal, Washington.*

I was on a spiritual search as a “Flower Child” in Oakland, California, but did not realize that I was searching for a path to follow. I had heard of Mahar Bab, a mystic who had not spoken for many years, and was attracted to his philosophy but could never find any books to further my investigation. I then joined the Rosecrucian Order and began taking a correspondence course but soon became disenchanted. My heart did not respond to the rituals and the scientific approach to the spiritual. This was taking place during the “Flower Children” era in Oakland and San Francisco. There was an air of mysticism and search for the meaning of life at this time, before the drug culture drowned out the purity of motive and subjected the consciousness to its pervasive influence.

I had an apartment on the edge of Berkeley. It was an old Governor’s mansion that was inhabited on three floors. My roommate and I had the top floor and we could see from the bathroom the lights of the city. How much more beautiful when we would climb onto the roof and overlook Lake Merritt and the Oakland lights. It came as a blow to everyone in the mansion when we were given notice that the

old house was going to be torn down. This started us on another search. Unable to find a dwelling of any comparison, our search led us to Maui, Hawaii. This move was quite shocking after living in the heart of a city.

Moving to an island that was intensely spiritual reopened my quest for “What is this all about?” I was thrown into a culture shock, constantly questioning, “What is my purpose? Why am I here on this island?” Unable to make sense out of anything, I continued hitch hiking around the island, looking for housing and looking for work.

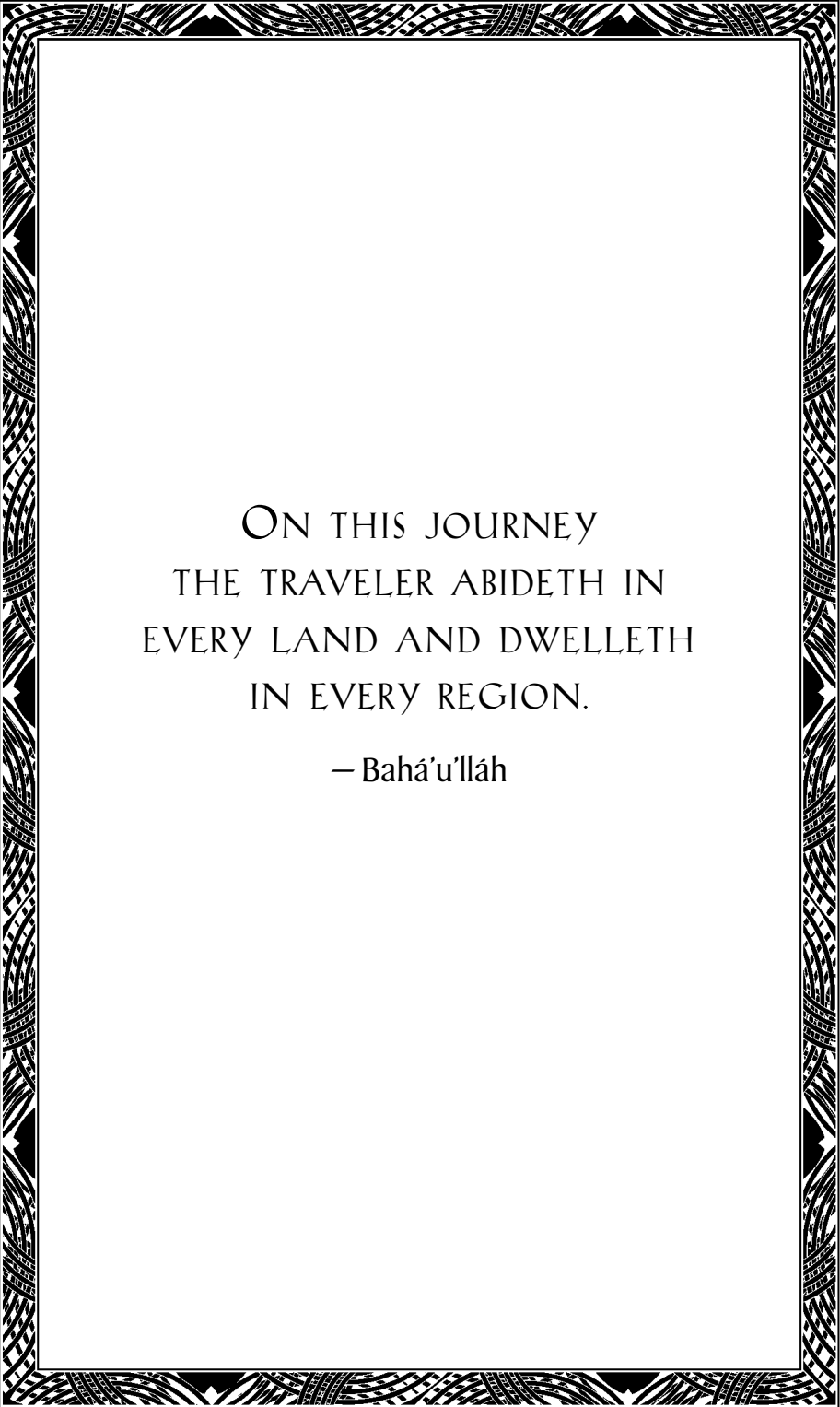
One day, while I was hitch hiking, someone picked me up to take me to my destination. On the way, we happened to start talking about religion and the person relayed the story of the martyrdom of the Báb to me. I found this very interesting and something deep down inside of me said, “Maybe this is why I am here on this island, to hear about this man from a distant land and the miracle that took place.” That was the first twinkling of awareness I had about my destiny of being in Hawaii and I will never forget that feeling. (The man who told me this story, I later found out, was not even a Bahá’í.)

I continued on my confused path for several months before I was invited to a gathering in Lahaina, next to the Pioneer Inn in a little park in front of the Public Library. The ocean was the backdrop for the group of Bahá’ís who were serving food and drinks to the island hippies. After the large group of hippies ate, they were invited to stay and hear the message the Bahá’ís had to share. I was one of the very few to remain, and as the Bahá’ís spoke I started to cry. I don’t remember what was said but whatever it was it went straight to my heart. I told them don’t go anywhere; I have to find my friend and tell her what I have found. I ran all over

THE CHOSEN PATH

Lahaina looking for my friend. After not being able to find her, I returned and everyone was gone except for one Hawaiian lady. We sat on the sea wall watching a magnificent sunset as she told me stories and tears rolled down our faces.

What a magic moment! I had found my Lord and the yearning in my heart had been fulfilled. This Faith became a love affair, an affair of the heart with my Beloved. The revelation of Bahá'u'lláh ricocheted through my heart. In His book *The Hidden Words*, I was overwhelmed by the verse, “O SON OF BEING! Thy heart is My home, sanctify it for My descent.” Indeed, the trials and tribulations of my search had prepared my heart for His descent. ❀



ON THIS JOURNEY
THE TRAVELER ABIDETH IN
EVERY LAND AND DWELLETH
IN EVERY REGION.

— Bahá'u'lláh

DO THIS IN REMEMBRANCE OF ME ...

Joel Caverly ❁ Trinidad & Tobago

Joel was born in Massachusetts and was introduced to the Bahá'í when he entered the Navy in 1961. After becoming a Bahá'í, he later moved to Boston. He currently resides in Port of Spain, Trinidad & Tobago.

I was born on a farm in Ipswich, Massachusetts, in 1940. We belonged to the Episcopal Church, from which the Faith in that town obtained many of its earliest converts. The godparents of my youngest sister, Mary, were also members of the church—Harry and Ethelinda Merson. When I was about 14, I heard that the Mersons had become Bahá'ís, and I asked my mother what Bahá'ís were. She said, “They think Jesus Christ is just like the other prophets.” I wasn't sure if that was a criticism or not, but I didn't pursue it. Our Minister, the Rev. C. Daniel Boone, always was strongly anti-Catholic in his sermons, but one day he said that our church was “High Episcopal” and the closest of all the protestant churches to the Catholics. This was confusing to me, but I didn't pursue it. I always sat by a window that had a picture of Christ dressed in a green robe holding a lamb. The legend said “Do this in remembrance of me until I come again.” One day I asked the picture “When are You coming again?” There was no answer.

During my junior year in high school, I had a summer job with the local Ipswich Chronicle and enjoyed it

immensely. At the end of the summer, the head of the printing room came out to the office and invited me to take a tour, since I was at the end of my employment there. I went around with him and he explained to me how all of the various machines functioned. This included the old linotype machine, a device that is probably no longer in use. The operator was starting a new item for the paper. When he had done the first line of type, he found it was imperfect because the machine needed adjusting and gave it to me as a souvenir. It was still warm. I kept it, and after high school I was off in 1957 to university for four years.

I then entered the U.S. Navy in 1961 for four years as a musician. I ended up in boot camp with a Bahá'í named Frank Talley from Pennsylvania. We went to the Navy Music School together in Washington, D.C. He started to tell me about the Bahá'í Faith, and at leave time I went home with him to West Chester, Pennsylvania, as it was not far away. I stayed at the home of his grandmother, Mrs. Margaret Lear. She and her late husband Clarence were devout Bahá'ís and strong members of the West Chester community. She taught me about the Faith, as did Frank, but I was not yet convinced. She gave me lots of Bahá'í books and I read every one of them. I went to sea duty in Norfolk, Virginia, and Frank went to Hawaii. I continued to visit Nana (Mrs. Lear) when I had leave and she kept teaching me the Faith. I enjoyed going to West Chester. The folks were very warm and friendly.

The telling moment came when I went on TAD (Temporary Assigned Duty) from Norfolk to New York, where a change of command was to take place at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Navy bands were forever playing “change of commands.” I visited my aunt, Mrs. Bertha Caverly in Ft. Lee, New Jersey, just across the river. She was

the organist at the church she went to, and she invited me to come along. I was not at all familiar with that church or anything about its history. It was a communion Sunday. As I can recall from that occasion, the minister ate the bread, and distributed the wine to the congregation. The service ritual was very similar to the Episcopal Church. When he got to the part where he said “Do this in remembrance of Me until I come again,” I was overwhelmed with the realization that He had come again! It struck me at that moment! I had the answer to the question I had asked years ago. I immediately phoned Nana and told her I wanted to come to West Chester to enroll in the Faith. She was trying to figure out what had happened, but I couldn’t tell her on the phone. The Bahá’í friends from the nearest Assembly, Wilmington, Delaware, came over to West Chester for my enrollment. It was a wonderful evening.

I went from Norfolk back to Boston to finish my tour of duty. When I got out of the Navy I went home to “clean out” my belongings and decided to settle down in a suburb outside of Boston. After getting settled in, I happened to come across a piece of linotype that was given to me when I worked for the Ipswich Chronicle as an intern. I had never noticed what was printed on it and was shocked to see the words “Bahá’í World Faith” written on it. I still have it with me after all these years. ❀

THE DAY OF CELEBRATION

Adrienne Ellis Reeves ❁ USA

*A*drienne was born in southern Illinois and first learned about the Bahá'í Faith in the city of Phoenix. She became a Bahá'í in 1938 and most of her family members followed in her footsteps. She has served as an Auxiliary Board member for the Bahá'í Faith for many years and is semi-retired. She is an author of several fiction novels.

I was born and raised in a small town called Altamont — in southern Illinois where my paternal grandfather had established a barbershop with his sons and brother. My mother's forbears had come to Southern Illinois from Virginia and Kentucky and became the backbone of a small farming community. They worshipped in a Baptist church that they had helped establish and many generations of my ancestors were buried in the cemetery next to it. My daddy had met my mother at a High School in St. Louis where black people sent their children once they had completed eighth grade. That High School provided eager young scholars with the equivalent of a Junior college education. Mother and Daddy took full advantage of this opportunity ending up at the top of their graduating class. After they got married and moved back to Southern Illinois, eight children were born out of that union. Four were girls and four were boys. One boy died in infancy. We were raised in the Baptist church and adhered to the strict ritual of attending Sunday school, participating in the 11:00 church service, as well as

all of the other programs offered year round for children such as Children's day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Christmas, and Easter.

At that time, we were the only black family in that town. My mother had yearned for the security of a large, closely knit black community to live in so eventually, she made a decision to move to a city called Alton. Unfortunately, my father stayed behind to run the barbershop. These were very difficult times for us, to the extent that Daddy had to sleep in a back room attached to the barbershop. Despite the hardships, Daddy did all that he could to send money to us from the earnings he made in the barbershop. We initially had to stay in my grandmother's basement until we could find our own place to live. We lived in a succession of small houses and continued to attend church. When I became a senior in High School, I spent that year in Chicago where I lived with relatives who urged me to stay and go to college there. During that entire year I never once heard about the Bahá'í Faith. By the end of that year, my mother told me that the family would be moving to Prescott, Arizona because Daddy had gone there to find work as a barber. I was torn between staying in Chicago and going to Arizona. In the end, I opted to go to Arizona with my family. Once we moved there, we joined a Baptist church in our neighborhood while Daddy joined a Methodist church that we often visited with him.

I enrolled in a Junior College in Arizona and was very content with life there. Among my friends was a girl who had a wonderful voice, as did her mother. Her mother organized a small group of us to sing Negro spirituals. We had only practiced a few times when she told us that we were invited to sing at an event across town in the white neighborhood. This event happened to be a celebration of some sort held in the gardens of a white family. I was not aware of the

significance of that seemingly chance circumstance but that was the first contact I had with the Bahá'í Faith.

I recall little of what was said on that occasion but realize now that it was held on Naw Ruz, a celebration of the Bahá'í New Year on the 21st of March. What I experienced from that event was an atmosphere of genuine friendliness. It had a strong spiritual impact on my soul. We were all invited to future events by the Bahá'ís and I kept going across town to attend these meetings.

Little by little, I began to absorb the fact from the Bahá'í teachings that God had never left humanity without guidance. I began to understand that from time to time, He communicates His Will through messages from his Prophets and Messengers. The Bahá'ís taught me that these messengers from God are divinely inspired and have come to represent God through men like Krishna, Moses, Zoroaster, Buddha, Jesus Christ, Muhammad, and most recently the Bab, and Bahá'u'lláh.

My heart and spirit was touched at the first meeting I attended with the Bahá'ís, and my intellect found answers to the questions I had pondered over since I was old enough to read and understand. One question I was perplexed about was “ How could the Almighty God who created the universe love and save only Christians”? What about the greater part of humanity who was neither non-white nor Christian, and inhabited the largest part of the globe?

My heart was so comforted when I understood that God left no one out. It was explained at these meetings that man in his ignorance and prejudice had created racial prejudice from which we suffered, but that God through Baha'u'llah intended to liberate man from this spiritual disease. To experience this with the Bahá'ís was a revelation. A few weeks after I began attending these Bahá'í meetings, the lady of the house said,

“Don’t you want to become a part of this?” Knowing only a few facts but convinced of what my heart and spirit felt, I answered instantly and unequivocally, “yes”! I became a Bahá’í in 1938. My blessed mother was very concerned about what I had gotten into so she immediately began to investigate the Bahá’í Faith for herself. Within a couple of months, she embraced the Faith as well.

This was a serious step for a life long devoted Christian and my mother’s letter of resignation from the Baptist Church caused a big stir. But she responded to this commotion by stating that her father, himself a staunch Christian, told her that if she ever heard of the return of Christ, she must investigate it. Also, in the Bahá’í community, she said she found herself delivered from the stifling atmosphere of racial prejudice and separation that existed between the races in Prescott.

My mother began teaching the three oldest children that were out of the house and they eventually became Bahá’ís. The three younger ones, a boy and three girls, were raised from that point as Bahá’ís. I left home to go to the south to help establish the Faith there. Daddy eventually became a Bahá’í and when the family moved to Los Angeles, he and mother opened their home for regular informational gatherings called ‘firesides’. My mother eventually became the first black to serve on the Local Spiritual Assembly of Los Angeles, and also helped establish the Faith in various parts of California.

Since that time, most of my sibling’s spouses became Bahá’í and their children and children’s children have also become Bahá’ís. Since becoming a Bahá’í, I have endeavored to serve the Bahá’í Faith as best as I can. I feel that Baha’u’llah is the Messenger of God for this day and that His teaching of the Oneness of Mankind is the only hope for humanity. ❁

THE TEMPLE IN MY MIDST

Allen Forsyth ✿ Scotland

R*aised in Scotland, Allen first heard about the Bahá'í Faith in Chicago, Illinois. After visiting the House of Worship in India, he became a Bahá'í.*

I was brought up in Scotland as a Presbyterian Christian, although the fact that my father was an atheist meant that I was very aware of treating religion as a matter of choice and not of birth. I always had an interest in religion but never found anything in the church that drew me to it. I felt that Jesus was obviously someone special and different but it didn't go further than that. I remember being in church when the minister talked about Christ returning and feeling very strongly that if He did return, the members of the church would persecute Him in the same way He had been treated the first time around.

As a student, I gradually became interested in spiritual matters and dabbled in transcendental meditation before taking up yoga. After graduating and working for a couple of years my company sent me to Chicago for a two-year posting. It was there that I first heard about the Faith. I had also seen photographs of the House of Worship before I arrived in Chicago. The building is quite well known in the Chicago area and so, when a Jewish friend suggested we go and visit it one Sunday, I was quite intrigued.

The building struck me as beautiful but I found it very difficult to put into perspective. There were very few other

visitors that day and the impression I had was that some people had come from another planet, built this beautiful, perfect building, and left. In the visitor's center, there was a slide show with some introductory information, but it didn't make any impact on me. However, I did buy a book on my way out. It was called *The Imperishable Dominion* by Udo Schaefer. The book then sat on my bookshelf or nearly two years.

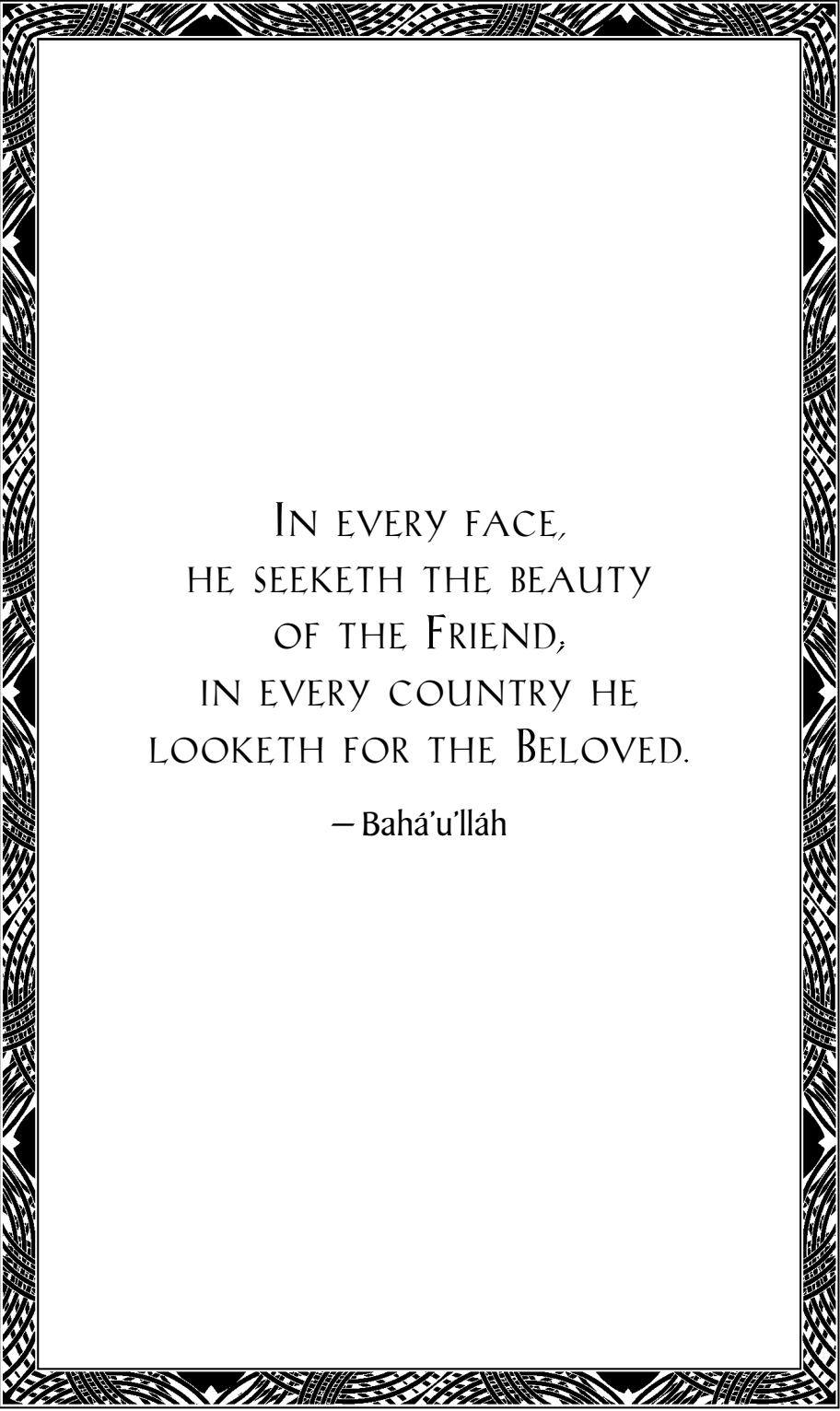
Two years later I was living in Amsterdam on another posting with the company. I was materially fine but spiritually unhappy. I had become a vegetarian and wanted to do something with my life to make a positive difference. I was investigating the possibility of doing voluntary work in a developing country and planned a three-week holiday in India. The visit to India was partly to satisfy my continuing spiritual search. Through yoga I had become interested in Hinduism and was keen to find out more at the source.

During the holiday I visited temples and holy sites and read a lot of Hindu books. By the end of it I had not had any transforming experiences but was in a more heightened state of spiritual receptivity. My return flight home was from Bombay, but I had to fly to Cochin in the south to get to Bombay. On the flight from Cochin to Bombay, I read an article in the in-flight magazine all about the opening of the House of Worship in New Delhi that was happening just at that time. The article had many pictures of the building and its beauty struck me so much that I resolved to read my Bahá'í book immediately on returning home. I never got to see the House of Worship myself because it was too late and I had only been traveling in the south of India.

After reading a few pages of the book, I knew I had found something very, very special. In fact, I knew deep down that this was what I had always been looking for. The teachings were so perfect, so pure, so moral, and so different from anything I had encountered before. I was convinced

this must be divine. Desperate to get in touch with the Bahá'ís, I consulted the phone directory, looked up “Bahá'í” and found a phone number. Mrs. Djavdan, a wonderful Persian lady, answered the phone and invited me to an Information Evening (fireside) that I attended. That evening, and the weekly meetings I attended for the next five months, confirmed to me that what was in the book was for real.

It was a magical time for me. Each week I would be loaned a different book and would usually read it within the week. I knew that deciding to become a Bahá'í would be the most important decision I would ever make so I didn't want to make it until I was 100% sure. However, my own inner weaknesses and doubts meant that after a while I realized that I could never be 100% sure. I wanted so much to be a part of the community and to contribute towards it. Ultimately, I was faced with having to make a leap of faith. I trusted that God would not lead me astray if my motives were sincere. To everyone's relief I finally handed over a signed declaration card. All praise be to God that I finally made the decision to become a Bahá'í. ♣



IN EVERY FACE,
HE SEEKETH THE BEAUTY
OF THE FRIEND,
IN EVERY COUNTRY HE
LOOKETH FOR THE BELOVED.

— Bahá'u'lláh

WELCOME HOME, BROTHER

Dr. Kurt Hein ❁ USA

K*urt works as a professor at Linfield College in McMinnville, Oregon. He previously worked at the interim principal at the Maxwell International Bahá'í School and helped establish the WLGI radio station at the Louis Gregory Institute. He is married and has two children.*

My conscious relationship with the Bahá'í Faith has roots in my childhood and my youth, to be sure. I went to a Lutheran elementary school, but my parents became discouraged with the “culture” of the dominant churches. We then attended a Unitarian church for a while, but church life rapidly diminished in our lives. As a young person, I lived in a multicultural, multi-ethnic city, San Francisco, and my parents were very much in favor of interacting with a wide diversity of people. My best friend in high school was Jewish. And many of my brother's closest friends were Jewish, as well. In 1960, my parents went for a long trip to the Orient and my grandmother accompanied them. A few years later, they encouraged my brother to spend a long summer in the Balkans.

When I was 18, during my freshman year in college, I heard about the Chapman College, Seven Seas division—a ship that spent a four-month semester circling the globe. So I signed on and went around the world in 1966, when I was 18. I saw an incredible diversity of cultures and customs in 17 different countries. I have vivid memories of temples in

India, the Sea of Galilee, mosques in Cairo, St. Paul's cathedral in Rome, the Ngorongoro crater in Tanzania, and many exotic people the world over. In terms of my spiritual life, what I saw was our collective quest—people everywhere were seeking meaning, globally engaged in the process of being human. But I didn't put a spiritual label on my thoughts at the time. I spent my junior year in Europe, to learn more about the world.

In the beginning of 1969, back at the University of Oregon, in Eugene, I worked in a program tutoring two “mentally-retarded” young women. We were all the same age. One of my jobs was to teach Peggy how to count sequentially. The other young woman, Janet, was not present in a way I could understand. Janet made sounds and verbal comments that made no sense: “baa, baa, haa, hee, baa” and so forth. Anyway, one day I was working with Peggy and I said that it was time for her to count to three. I said, “First, I will do it.” I had some tokens on the table. I picked one up and placed it in front of me and said, “One.” Then I picked up another token and placed it next to the first and said, “Two.” Then I picked up a third token, placed it next to the other two, and said, “Three.” Peggy burst into a joyful grin, smiled, jumped up and down, clapped her hands, and said, “Good! Good, Kurt, you did it!” I had to leave the room. Peggy's loving, sincere enthusiasm far surpassed my attitude toward her. Needless to say, that hit me hard and set my head spinning.

Not long after that, a friend sent me a copy of the *I Ching* (the Taoist Book of Changes). I spent a good deal of time reading that book. One day, I got immersed and understood that it was addressing the human being's dual reality: spiritual and material. I began to understand that what mattered most to me was my inner reality—not the

daily Kurt walking down the street; but the Kurt who was always present and always cared about what was happening around him, to him, and to the people he cared about. That led to my decision to return to doing things that really mattered to me.

In the summer of 1969 my first choice was to return to dancing, which was one of my favorite hobbies. Not having done any serious dancing for several years, I sought possibilities that were not too demanding. I learned that there was a group of people who would get together once a week to participate in international folk dances. So I joined the group. It was wonderful! After having participated with the group for a few weeks, many of them decided to go to Portland to attend a special folk dance session on Friday night. I had an old logging van that I offered to use to take the group up to Portland. One of the people in the group, Sandy, had a friend in Portland, Loring, who offered his home for us to stay in. So, we danced on Friday night. On Saturday, we went to a terrific jazz concert in the park. Then, on Saturday night, we went to see the movie “Midnight Cowboy.” It was a very powerful film. It made me reflect deeply on what is meaningful in human relationships—how our hearts, our souls, are the essence of who we are. When our souls connect with other souls, that is transcendent. So, that night I went out onto the roof of Loring’s home. It was a beautiful summer night. It was about midnight and I was reflecting on the importance of the message the movie was conveying. While I was sitting there, Sandy came out on the roof and asked if she could join me. Well, we started talking at about 1 AM and we didn’t finish until summer. I had much to say about what I was thinking—that people need to love each other, the terrible confusion in the world, the need for people to be happy, to overcome prejudice, to love each

other, to build a better world. I did most of the talking. Sandy would occasionally offer a quotation from the Bahá'í Faith or she would affirm one of my observations by telling me what Bahá'ís believed.

A little later in the morning, our group went to the Maranatha Church of God, an AME church in Portland. There was a major gospel concert going on, with several different gospel groups performing. The best-known group was the Edwin Hawkin Singers, who had a popular record out, "Oh, Happy Day." Well, the church was so full that I ended up sitting on the floor of the center aisle separating the pews. Sandy sat in front of me. It was a very energetic gathering. I had never been in a Black church before. What was so wonderful for me in that experience was to feel the authentic presence of the joyful spirits of the people in the room. It was quite a contrast to my previous church experiences. I was having a fine time, and really enjoying the radiant joy of the choirs and the congregation.

One of the preachers got up and said, "Now, turn to the person to your right and tell them 'Jesus loves you,'" so I turned to my right and there was an elderly Black woman sitting above me. I said to her, "Jesus loves you." She said to me, "Well, I guess he does, and he loves you, too!"

And the preacher said, "Now to the person on your left."

So I looked up to my left and there was another older African American woman smiling at me. I said, "Jesus loves you," and she said, "Jesus loves you, too, honey." Then, Sandy leaned back and turned to me and said, "And Bahá'u'lláh loves you, too, Kurt."

Yes, it all made sense. We were talking about the Holy Spirit who was illuminating everyone and bringing them joy. I really have to say that, for the first time in my conscious

awareness, I felt the power and the presence of the Holy Spirit and it warmed my heart. When we got back to Eugene, Sandy arranged for me to meet her friend, Ray. Ray was a shoe salesman and a fine teacher. I had several meals with Ray over the next three days and I also read Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era, a fine introduction to the Bahá'í Faith. On Thursday night, Sandy and a bunch of the Bahá'í youth from Eugene were gathering together on campus to go down to a special youth conference in Sacramento, California. I joined them and could not believe their diversity and their evident harmony and love for each other. Clearly, they were very excited! I watched them drive away and felt left behind. So, that night I called Ray and arranged to meet him for lunch on Friday. We met at a café. I explained to Ray that I understood the central teachings of the Bahá'í Faith and felt them to be powerful and true. My biggest question was, “Why do I have to accept Bahá'u'lláh?”

Ray said, “Kurt, these aren't simple questions. These things take time. Give it a try—it's an open door—you can come in and you can go out whenever you choose.” At that moment I knew I was a Bahá'í. After our long lunch, Ray had to get back to the store. He sent me over to a house in Springfield to “meet some folks.” When I got there, I knocked on the front door. A woman came and opened the door—with her foot. JoBeth had no arms. She had a toddler hanging onto her—arms wrapped around Mom's neck and clinging tight. Later, her husband came home for dinner. Marty didn't have any arms, either! They were Bahá'ís. They had a housemate, Earl, who was a Bahá'í, too. So we talked all afternoon and evening. Finally, at midnight, I said I had to go home. I was tired. Earl smiled, shook my hand, and said, “You should go to a Bahá'í conference that will be held

in Sacramento tomorrow, Kurt.” Ugh. So I drove back to my house that night, woke up a housemate, and told him we had to go to Sacramento.

About ten hours later, we pulled up to the conference site. I walked up to the registration desk and told the woman I was a new Bahá’í and wanted to attend the gathering. She asked me my name and I went in. I could hear the person speaking pause for the interruption. The woman then announced, “There’s a guy outside from Eugene who says he’s a new Bahá’í. Anybody know him? His name’s Kurt.” I heard screams and yells for joy and the door burst open with several folks, including Sandy, surrounding me, hugging me, and sweeping me into the room. There were about 200 youth inside, all of them standing and clapping and smiling and cheering. The man speaking was a former Black Panther—still in his leathers. He looked at me, smiled, and wrapped his arms around me, lifting me up in a bear hug. “Welcome home, brother!” ❀

THE MAN WITH THE WHITE BEARD

Gertrude (Trudy) White ❁ USA

Gertrude was born in Salt Lake City, Utah in December 24th, 1924. Her mother was the first in her family to become a Bahá'í. Gertrude later became a Bahá'í in Los Angeles, California. After her husband passed away in 1971, she went to live in South Carolina as a home front pioneer. She currently lives in the city of Charleston.

I first heard about the Bahá'í Faith in the spring of 1934 or 1935 in Salt Lake City, Utah when a young white lady came to share a special message at the African Methodist Church that I attended. Our minister asked her to come later that evening to share the message, so she came back later that day. She returned that evening and appeared on the program. After the Minister introduced her, the two things we remembered were the two names – Bahá'í Faith and Baha'u'llah. The lady who gave the talk that day was Marguerite Sears.

My mother investigated the claims that Mrs. Sears made that day and later became a member of the Bahá'í Faith. My mother, Mrs. Isabel Ellis, became the third person to become a Bahá'í in Salt Lake City. Soon after, I got married and remained in Salt Lake City for a year. I did not like the conditions there because of the racial inequality that blacks were forced to accept. Living there was just like living in the Deep South. Something that I felt really bad about and which left an indelible impression on all of Blacks who lived there was the way German prisoners were treated during

World War II. German prisoners who were sent to Salt Lake City were treated better than black people. This was a fact we all experienced. We were segregated in public places and not allowed in places whites congregated. This all made me very angry and resentful. As a result of this, my husband and I decided to go live in Los Angeles where the conditions were much better.

I found that Los Angeles had a very active Bahá'í youth group, as well as hosted a number of excellent firesides, conferences, and summer schools. After attending a few Bahá'í meetings, the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith answered all of my questions I had about the racial inequality I had experienced in Salt Lake City. The teachings gave me a different idea about people and made me realize that all races are equal and that mankind is one. The Bahá'ís I knew seemed to live that.

I declared my belief in Baha'u'llah and sent my letter to the Los Angeles Local Spiritual Assembly. In those days, a person wanting to become a Bahá'í had to send a letter to the Local Assembly and request a formal interview. Also, you had to read three books and pass the interview before you could enroll in the Bahá'í community.

On April 8, 1948 I became a Bahá'í. After I became a Bahá'í, I later found out an amazing thing that happened over 20 years prior to my mother becoming a Bahá'í in Salt Lake City. This must have taken place sometime in 1912 or 1913. As the story goes, my father happened to be a mail carrier in Salt Lake City. One day he came home and told my mother that when he was near the Mormon Temple, he saw this group of people around an oriental man with a flowing white beard who was wearing a very distinctive looking hat. He described it all to my mother. Later, when my mother became a Bahá'í and brought home a picture of Abdu'l-Bahá, my father said that he was the man that he had told her about the day he was near the Mormon Temple. ❁

THE WATER OF LIFE

Natalija Utenkova ❁ Russia

Natalija was born in the Republic of Russia in 1977 and learned about the Bahá'í Faith from a family friend in 1992. She later became a Bahá'í in 1994 after attending a Bahá'í Youth Conference.

I was born in a small town called Ukmerge, in the Republic of Russia. I was the second oldest among three other siblings. I had an older sister and a younger brother. My father was a policeman and my mother was a secretary in a wood working company. My parents had very strong feelings about being responsible for my education while I was growing up.

I always saw them reading books and we children were encouraged to do the same. Diligence, courtesy, kindness, generosity and obedience were stressed throughout my childhood and it was done quite simply by example. I was kept very busy. I went to school, and studied music after school for 7 years. I played cello and piano, and I had to do both things as well as I could.

Nevertheless, there was something missing in my life that I began consciously to realize at the age of 15. My parents were atheists so there was no religious education in the family. I am convinced that my very first step towards spirituality was through music and the teachers who taught me at music school. Even though I was a very quiet child and rather introverted, I enjoyed listening to what others had to

say. Since I rarely found myself thinking along the same lines as the other children, I preferred to keep my thoughts to myself. Music gave me a chance to let my emotions and thoughts flow without my having to speak. It was exactly what I needed because I didn't have the right words for them to be expressed in any language. It was then that I started to feel that there must be more to life than the world I lived in. The injustices that I began to learn about both in Russia and in other countries made me ponder this issue even more deeply.

So at this quite complicated stage of my life, I began to read Hare Krishna books. Under this influence I became a vegetarian and my interest in spiritual matters grew at an unbelievable rate. I can't say that I understood much of what I was reading, but I needed that kind of spiritual "food" to help me get a grip on the perplexities of life. Around that time our family had a guest over, a young girl named Henrika. She was a year or two older than me. She was the daughter of my mother's friend from the city of Vilnius. I happened to find out that she was a Baha'i. The Baha'is in my area were organizing a youth seminar in our town. I went to listen mainly because this friend of ours invited us to come, and also I was interested in meeting the foreigners who were visiting the area.

At the time, I had no interest in learning about the Bahá'í Faith. I can't remember much of what was said but I can clearly remember how easy, pleasant and even enjoyable it was for me to listen to the basic teachings of this new Faith. In my heart I was searching for "something". Because I did not have a formal religious background, I was open to the new ideas the Bahá'ís shared with me. I found that the Bahá'í teachings answered many of the questions I had about life and opened up a whole new world of knowledge about the reality of God.

Sometime in 1992 Henrika and another Bahá'í woman named Helen Smith, who happened to be an English teacher from the United States, started having firesides in what was then known as the Photo Club. I went to a few of these firesides. Later in the spring of 1994 Baha'is from the towns of Vilnius & Kaunas, and some visiting Bahá'í youth from the United States who were part of the “ Martha Root” project also held firesides at the Photo club. At that time I could not identify any profound reasons for going to these events than to translate the talks for the American friends. Despite my reservations in attending these sessions, the Photo Club firesides became very special to me because it is where I first learned about the Central Figures and institutions of the Bahá'í Faith.

I learned about Bahá'u'lláh, The Bab, Abdu'l-Bahá, Shoghi Effendi, and the Universal House of Justice. All those names were in the beginning a bit confusing, but somehow I found all of it to be very interesting. In addition to learning about this, I learned to pray. That was a big thing for me because I had never been in a church and had never prayed before. The reverence, humility and high concentration that I saw and felt when Bahá'is were praying astounded me. This simple act at every meeting taught me a great deal about the Faith in a mysterious but effective way.

A little later in July 1994, a couple of us, who were hanging out with the visiting Bahá'í youth in my hometown, were invited to go to the city of Kraslava in Latvia to the Youth Unity Festival. This was another event that made a great impression on me. There were people of different nationalities and different cultures who had come together to learn more about the Bahá'í Faith, to serve the community, and to have fun together. I could feel that there was something uniting all of them together that was real and


powerful. For about a year after that, I was quite an active seeker learning and participating in the Unity Feasts. Some of these Feasts were so simple that only water and biscuits were served. Despite the lack of material refreshments, the meetings were rich in spiritual food.

During this time, I learned about the obligation to read the Writings at least in the morning and in the evening. I decided to see if I could do that. I had a very rough first translation of the Hidden Words near my bed and would read half of the book each time I picked it up. I never got bored reading it over and over again. So the mechanics of being a Bahá'í were already in place, but my spirit was still having a problem fitting in to the process. I also learned that Bahá'ís had to Fast each year and that it was obligatory once a person reached the age of 15 years old. That sounded to me like it was impossible, so I said to myself that if I ever decided to become a Baha'i, I would do it after the Fast was over.

From the start of the Fast in March of 1995, I coincidentally happened to be with the Bahá'is in the city of Vilnius. I don't remember the reason we were there but of course all Bahá'is had suddenly stopped eating and drinking because the Fast had started. I felt really bad when I ate something in front of the others, so I decided to eat as little as possible so I would not tempt them with food. That day I stayed overnight at the National Bahá'i Centre. I remember myself lying on the floor in my sleeping bag, alone in that big guest room with the Greatest Name on the wall in front of me. I somehow felt a lot of anxiety or restlessness in my heart the entire night.

The next morning when the first local Baha'i, Aiste Mackeviciute, arrived I approached her and told that I would like to become a Bahá'í. On March 3, 1995, I joined the Bahá'í Faith. On that day I learned that when the time

comes to be born — physically or spiritually — nothing can stop that process. My strong determination about avoiding the Fast, and my conviction that I wasn't worthy of being a Baha'i were turned into dust. I feel that it was by the Will of God that all of the impediments to becoming a Bahá'í were removed instantly. At that moment I felt I had no will of my own and there was no way I could turn back on my heels. The decision had to be made and it could not wait. The first thing I had to learn as a Baha'i was to put all my trust in God and never to think that my life will be the way I want it to be. Of course I had to learn that lesson during the Fast. Since then the annual Fast has become a very important part in my life. It is a special time for me. A time when I seem to learn and change. ❁



HE JOINETH EVERY COMPANY,
AND SEEKETH FELLOWSHIP
WITH EVERY SOUL, THAT HAPLY
IN SOME MIND HE MAY
UNCOVER THE SECRET OF
THE FRIEND, OR IN SOME FACE
HE MAY BEHOLD THE BEAUTY OF
THE LOVED ONE

— Bahá'u'lláh.

TAKING THE CAKE

Elisabeth Appels ♣ The Netherlands

E*lisabeth was born in the city of Bassum, Netherlands on November 19th, 1930. She moved to the United States in 1967 and became a Bahá'í in San Mateo, California on March 15, 1984. She is currently retired and lives in Lelystad, Netherlands. She writes and does acting in her spare time.*

My story begins on a Tuesday in October of 1983. I was living in San Mateo, California, at that time. The telephone rang. It was a new customer for my husband who was a piano tuner and repairman. He and I had recently separated. He was living in San Francisco but was still using the telephone number at the house for his business. I was taking messages for him and calling him in the evenings.

I did not usually talk with the customers who called but just asked for their address and phone number. This particular call, however, was different. This time we continued to talk. The customer's name was Richard and he talked with great enthusiasm and excitement about the new twelve-foot Steinway grand he had just bought. He and his wife had recently moved to a brand new home in San Mateo. We had a lively conversation and then he even invited me to come over to his house to see the piano for myself.

After I hung up, I got a strange feeling; a desire to go over to Richard's house right away. I told myself this was not appropriate so soon. I tried to forget the whole thing. But after 10 minutes, I felt drawn to the phone and found myself dialing Richard's number. What would I say?

“Hello,” I said, a bit embarrassed, but oddly confident. “Richard, this is Elisabeth Appels. You had invited me to see the piano. Would it be possible to come today?” I couldn’t believe I was being so bold!

“Of course,” he said, with that same lively enthusiasm. “Let me give you directions.”

Luckily for me, this address was not too far from where I lived. I could easily go there on my bicycle, the only form of transportation I had!

On the way to his house, an inner voice told me to pay close attention. Something important was waiting for me there. I smiled, thinking my imagination was running away with me. I was just going to see the Steinway.

It was a large house in a new development. I walked up the path and rang the doorbell. A tall and slender man, about 33 years old, welcomed me. His eyes were glacial blue and he looked very vibrant and healthy. I entered the spacious living room with its white carpeting and white upholstered furniture. The black Steinway stood in the area between the living and dining rooms. It was beautiful, but I somehow knew that the piano was not the reason I had been drawn there.

My eyes fell on a portrait in a silver frame of an older man wearing a turban. He had a very impressive face with strong features and there was something about his eyes, something very endearing. Would it be Richard’s father-in-law? I was curious but did not ask.

The house was lovely and I enjoyed being there, but I still did not understand why I had been drawn so strongly to come there. What could be so important? The telescope? Or his big copper frame in the shape of a pyramid?

Richard continued to talk, but it became suddenly difficult for me to focus on what he was saying because a

very strange thing was happening to me. I began to feel extremely happy, happier than I had felt in years. I felt like I had wings. I felt so light, all my troubles fell away. A broad smile came to my face. I felt like I was COMING HOME! I had to tell Richard. He was still a stranger to me, but despite that, I gave him a big hug. It felt completely natural and good.

Before I went home, Richard told me that there would be a meeting that coming Saturday night and that I would be welcome to attend. I was still glowing and didn't even ask him what the meeting was going to be about. I just smiled some more and thanked him for the invitation. For the rest of the week, I kept telling myself, "That was a nice experiment, but I'm certainly not going to that meeting."

Saturday came and I was still saying to myself, "No way! I am not going tonight." Then, at seven o'clock, I went to my closet and heard myself thinking, "What shall I wear tonight?" And I knew I had to go. It was already dark and I didn't have a light on my bike, but I felt very protected as I rode towards Richard's house.

The minute I entered the house I got that same happy feeling. There were eight other people there and everyone was so friendly. Richard's wife, Shahin, was busy making sure her guests were comfortable. We all sat in the family room in the back of the house and a guest speaker talked about the various religions of the world. After the talk, a stately, silver-haired woman named Marilyn, who had once been a concert pianist, played the Steinway for us. Her son Alfred was playing the violin. All evening, I had a big smile on my face. My face was almost hurting from smiling so much.

At the end of the evening, one of the other guests offered to put my bike in the trunk of his car and drive me home. Everyone gave me a warm goodbye and Richard said that if I wanted to come to the meeting next week, I just had to call

and someone would pick me up. And I did want to come again! The whole week I was looking forward to it.

During the second meeting, I heard a word I had never heard before, the word Bahá'í. I was curious about it but I did not want to ask what it was. I decided it would be better to first ask other people I knew if they had heard of it. All that following week I asked and received various answers. Most people had never heard the word Bahá'í. Some thought it was a Jewish religion but more eastern. One person told me that the Bahá'ís were very strange people, a little nuts. Well, that was certainly not my impression!

One the third Saturday, it was my birthday. My daughter Brigitte, who was living in San Francisco, came down to celebrate with me. After dinner, she asked me what I wanted to do that night. I asked if she wanted to go with me to meet my new friends at the fireside meeting? She said, "Whatever you want to do is fine. It's your birthday!" So, off we went. As a present to me, Richard gave me the book *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*. Brigitte looked through the book and asked if she could buy one for herself. She also received a copy as a gift. We enjoyed the evening and Brigitte sang with Marilyn, who again played the piano after the talk.

A couple of days later, Brigitte telephoned me. "Are you reading the book, Mom?" I said, "Yes. Isn't it wonderful?"

"This book gives me answers to so many questions I've had for years!" she said.

Because of my impending divorce, I would have to soon move out of the house. Brigitte decided to leave San Francisco and move in with me in order to help me with this difficult transition. I had no idea what I would do or where I would be living in the future. I had no job at the time. Things

were very unsure but Brigitte and I were both hungry for more spiritual knowledge. We read our Bahá'í books together every evening and talked a lot about what we were reading.

Three months and many fireside meetings went by. One Friday afternoon, I was feeling sad because I wanted to become a Bahá'í, to really belong to this new faith. But I didn't feel ready. I kept telling myself, "You don't know enough yet. You have to wait until you have more knowledge." But when would I know enough? How many more months? How many more years? Would I ever know enough? The answers to my questions suddenly became clear to me.

"Even after you become a Bahá'í," I told myself. "You will still be able to learn and study. The process of learning will not end, but will continue your whole life. As a Bahá'í, you will get so many new blessings and the learning will be even more profound." How true! I didn't have to wait any longer. Tomorrow, at the fireside meeting, I would declare! I would become a Bahá'í!

I wanted to tell Brigitte, but she was at work and I knew how stressful her job was. I felt like I was going to explode from all the joy, but I would have to wait until she came home to share my happy news.

The minute Brigitte entered the house, she said to me, "Mom, I've made my decision! Tomorrow night, I am going to declare!" I laughed and told her, through tears, about my own decision. We hugged and kissed each other, amazed and overjoyed that we had made our independent decisions on the same day.

At the next fireside, I baked a big sheet cake with a whipped cream topping. Brigitte said, "What about writing 'We declare' on the cake with chocolate chips?"

THE CHOSEN PATH

And so we did! We covered the cake with foil so nobody could read it yet. We went to the fireside and when we came to the social part of the evening, the hostess took the foil off and everybody started crying. The host took a picture of us next to the cake. I often look at that photo. Brigitte and I both look so radiant! It was one of the most beautiful moments of my life! ❀

THE AFRICAN CANOE PADDLER

Dan Mitchell ♣ U.S.A

D*an was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois. He attended Michigan Technological University and after graduation got married to his wife at the Bahá'í House of Worship. He became a Bahá'í in 1971. He currently resides in Batavia, Illinois.*

I grew up in the white suburbs of Chicago. As a child, my parents took me to a church that I regularly attended even though my parents were not very active. The main reason they insisted that I attend this church was because the minister was a really great man. After graduating from high school in 1965, I attended college at Michigan Technological University in the upper part of Michigan. Back in those days, the location was very remote and predominantly white. Out of 3000 engineering students, only two were black. One of them soon became my best friend. When I came home for the summer and attended my church, I found that the minister was no longer there. I asked where he was and was informed that the congregation had asked him to leave because he had started inviting black families to attend “their church.” This turned me away from the church and I then became very skeptical about organized religion.

A year after college graduation I met my future wife. She was once engaged to a black man and they had made plans to get married at the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette near Chicago. At that time, this was one of the few places that were receptive to hosting interracial weddings. However, before the wedding took place, my wife and her

fiancé broke up. When we decided to get married she still wanted to have a Bahá'í wedding. I was skeptical until I found out they would not accept money. We met some Bahá'ís from Evanston who helped us plan the wedding and went to one fireside to better understand the Faith. The wedding went off just the way we wanted it to and I was satisfied that there were no strings attached.

A few months later we transferred to Tucson, Arizona. I was still anti-religious but the Bahá'í Faith stirred my curiosity to the point that I began to study the Faith and the other major religions to prove them wrong. Over the next year, I found various Bahá'í books in stores and read them all but never contacted the Bahá'ís. That next winter, my wife and I were camping in Sedona and saw a sign for a Bahá'í convention with free food. It was cold with snow in the hills all around us, so free food in the warm building sounded very good. We were totally amazed at the hospitality at this convention. I was close to declaring but was still very skeptical.

A few weeks later back in Tucson we went to a film and talk at a local church about exploring the upper reaches of the Nile River. During the talk the speaker showed a hard-working black native canoe paddler who was paddling very hard. The speaker said he was the best paddler he ever had and told all his audiences about him. He also said the paddler told him he was a Bahá'í and that there were a lot of Bahá'ís back in the United States.

The speaker said he never met any Bahá'ís but felt compelled to mention it at all his presentations. I was so impressed that this canoe paddler in the middle of Africa could make such an impact that it had to be true. The next day I called the Tucson LSA to make an appointment to declare, which was in January of 1971. I have often wondered how this canoe paddler could be thanked for the teaching work he accomplished. If he is still alive maybe he might someday read this story. ❁

KICKED OUT OF THE GARDEN

Glenn & Evelyn Asplund ♣ U.S.A

Glenn met his future wife, Evelyn, in Portland, Oregon, in 1945. After getting married to his wife Evelyn, they read about the Bahá'í Faith in the Seattle Times and attended firesides. They became Bahá'ís soon after. They currently reside in Seattle, Washington.

My wife, Evelyn, and I were raised in the Baptist tradition; and we first met in 1945 at a Baptist Conference in Portland, Oregon. It was pretty much love at first sight, and after getting better acquainted we discovered that we were in complete agreement concerning our attitudes about religion. Both of us had difficulty identifying with the Baptists, but we nevertheless made an effort to fit in and be good Christians. We'd both gone through the procedure of being "saved," but weren't too impressed with the concept. We soon decided to get married and raise a family.

In later years, we joined a Presbyterian Church near our home that allowed our growing children to attend Sunday school on a regular basis. From the theological standpoint, there was no problem here, and we remained relatively satisfied with our spiritual condition, as we perceived it.

As our children grew, and their awareness of life increased, they would often come home from Sunday school with many questions about things they'd been taught, that both Evie and I had always accepted without putting too much thought into it. Now, however, in trying to answer

their questions we were, for the first time in our lives, forced to confront our religious beliefs head on. This confrontation resulted in an intensive search for a belief system that would answer the many questions that had, all of a sudden, taken on so much importance; like, does God only love Christians, and will they be the only ones in heaven? What happens when we die? Is Jesus really God? If God is all loving, why did he require his son to die on the cross for things we'd done, etc., etc.?

We spent many years searching. We studied with Jehovah's Witnesses, Seventh Day Adventists, and Catholics. We took instruction in the Mormon Faith, progressed through the 3rd degree of Rosicrucian teachings, studied the Kahuna religions of Hawaii, read everything we could find on the Masters of the Far East, investigated the phenomenon of "speaking in tongues," and explored many of the various theories on reincarnation. Through all of our searching, we measured each belief system we studied with the only yardstick we had any confidence in at the time, the Holy Bible. Our method of search was to ferret out the inconsistencies, and when the inconsistencies became too great, we moved on to something new.

Our search seemed to be getting us nowhere, and we were becoming quite disillusioned with the whole business. We began thinking in terms of giving up on religion entirely, with the possibility of continuing to attend church for its social significance rather than for any religious fulfillment. It was during this period of indecision that an ad in the Seattle Times, for some unknown reason, caught Evie's attention. At the top of the ad was a rather strange word "Bahá'í." At first we thought it was "B'nai B'rith," but on reading further into the ad, it became quite evident that it most certainly was not B'nai B'rith. It said such things as: If you're a Christian and you're looking for the return of Christ, he's here. If you're a Jew and are looking for the Messiah, he's here. If you're a

Buddhist and you're looking for the 5th Buddha, he's here, and if you're a Muslim and you're looking for the 12th Imam, he's here. The ad indicated that the meeting was going to be at the Seattle Opera House that very night, and it was free, so we looked at one another and said, "Why not?" It was Saturday night, we had no other plans for the evening, and besides, it sounded a little "kooky" so, what the heck? We didn't for a second think it would be anything that we'd really be interested in, but thought it might be good for a chuckle or two.

When we arrived at the Opera House, the place was almost "standing room only." We assumed that most of these people must be Bahá'ís; and if this was so, how could we not have ever heard of this organization with the strange sounding name. We learned later that the only Bahá'ís in the audience barely filled the first row of the center section.

The meeting began with several vocal numbers by a racially - integrated group called "The Song Crafters." The songs they chose were of a somber nature and obviously not intended to work the audience into a state of altered consciousness, as is often done in religious meetings. (I mention this to point out that what happened later was not the result of an artificially induced spiritual experience.) The beautiful music was followed immediately by the reading of several prayers, and finally, the introduction of the speaker.

The speaker was a man from California by the name of Robert Quigley. His name meant nothing to us at the time, although we found out later that he was the producer of "Hollywood Squares" and involved in several other TV programs. At this point I must confess that, back in those days, lecturers usually lulled me to sleep, no matter what the subject, and I often wonder how I ever made it through college. Ten minutes into any lecture would usually find me a million miles away, unless, of course, the subject was of extreme interest to me. At the moment, I was just about to

doze off when all of a sudden I heard the speaker mention the year “1844.” Immediately my mind snapped to attention, because this particular date had been emphasized so much by the Seventh Day Adventists with whom we had studied. From that moment on, I heard every word the man said.

I disagreed with most everything I was hearing; but after the meeting I got the chance to speak with Mr. Quigley in the lobby of the opera house. When I confronted him with Bible verses that I was certain contradicted many of the things he’d said, he very kindly and patiently offered slightly different interpretations of the verses I presented, and I had to admit, he made a lot of sense. When we left the meeting that evening I’m quite certain I had experienced what the Baptists always referred to as “the born again experience.” I can’t describe the feeling exactly, but it was similar to the relief I felt upon getting out of the army, or when I graduated from college-like a great burden had been lifted from my shoulders. Although my conscious mind wasn’t accepting the things I’d heard, my subconscious mind obviously was.

During the ensuing week, the Seattle Bahá’í community had arranged five follow-up meetings. We attended all five meetings. But allow me to tell how close we came to rejecting the unspeakable bounty of Bahá’u’lláh’s revelation. I shudder when I even think of it.

First off, the meetings were held in a small room, off the main auditorium of the rather depressing structure known as the Eagle’s Auditorium in downtown Seattle. Just entering the building gave us doubts as to whether this was something we really wanted to do, but our curiosity motivated us to proceed to the room where the meetings were to take place. When we arrived at the room, and saw the cross-section of humanity that had gathered, we were quite certain that we didn’t belong there. There was a woman with a stocking cap on her head, a man with long greasy hair that looked like he hadn’t had a bath in months, and several others we

presumed were “street people.” Being a bit Waspish, we felt totally uncomfortable and were just about to turn and walk out, when an elderly gentleman in a three piece suit walked up and asked if he could help us find a seat. Fortunately we were ashamed to tell this fine gentleman we wanted to leave, and praise be to God, we sat down. After that first meeting, a team of horses couldn’t have kept us from returning the following four nights. From that time on, we attended every fireside, and every other Bahá’í event possible, and in a year and half we signed our cards. We knew we’d been kicked out of the old Garden of Eden and there was no going back. That gate had been shut forever.

I should tell you as an afterthought that both Evie and I are pushing 80 and we have four children, all Bahá’ís. ♣

SPARKS OF PEACE

Fitzgerald “Jerry” Clark ❁ Barbados

Jerry was born in Barbados and was introduced to the Bahá’í Faith by his aunt and a next-door neighbor. After participating in a Bahá’í youth group—Sparks for Peace—he became a Bahá’í in 1989.

I grew up on the island of Barbados. When I was 13 years old, my mother moved to the U.S.A. and my sister and I lived with an aunt while my mother did her best to support us. My aunt happened to be a Bahá’í. At the time, I did not know anything about the Bahá’í Faith. I grew up going to many different churches and everyone that I knew, as far as I was aware, was Christian. The first time my aunt told me that she was a Bahá’í, I recall thinking, “Oh my God! My aunt’s going to hell!”

There was a lady who lived near us who was also a Bahá’í. She was a West German lady who lived in Barbados and taught French. She had a wonderful collection of books and I loved to go to her house and browse through them. I would borrow books on psychic phenomena, aliens and UFOs, as well as on the power of the pyramids. The lady’s name was Christine Clark [no relation to the writer]. She was one of those special adults who spoke to kids as if they were adults. She would actually listen to me and we would sit and have discussions about many different topics. I loved her totally. She was at that time the most perfect person I had ever met. I was very impressed with her as a human being.

One day she showed me this Bahá'í magazine and we began to look through it together. I was absolutely amazed at the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. I realized that I had always believed in these teachings, but I had never found them all in any one place before. The Oneness of Humanity, the Oneness of God, the Oneness of Religion-these were all things which I intuitively knew to be the truth.

I remember an occasion when I was about 9 or 10 years old. Some Christians had come to our home to speak with us about the Bible. Everyone in our home was busy except me, so I spoke with them. I remember asking them "What happened to people who lived in Africa and the Americas before Christ was born?" My understanding of Christianity was anyone who was not Christian was supposed to go to hell.

However, this didn't seem fair to me since God had not sent Africans and Native American people prophets in the way that he had sent Prophets to the Jewish people. I remember them looking at each other and I could see them thinking, "Why is this kid asking us a question like this?" And they told me that when Christ died he went to hell for 3 days and preached to all of the sinners in hell so that those people could have a chance to be saved. This would obviously be an unjust situation as well because how could it be just to send people to hell for being sinful if God had never sent any prophets to them? Anyway, I decided to ask a follow-up question, "Well then, what happened to those people who lived in Africa and the Americas after Christ died and before the Gospel reached them?" This caused them to look at each other again and at that moment I knew they did not know the answer.

It would be several years later when my friend Christine was explaining the Bahá'í Faith to me that I would finally get answers to these questions that made a lot of sense to me. That evening was the beginning of my journey as a Bahá'í. I

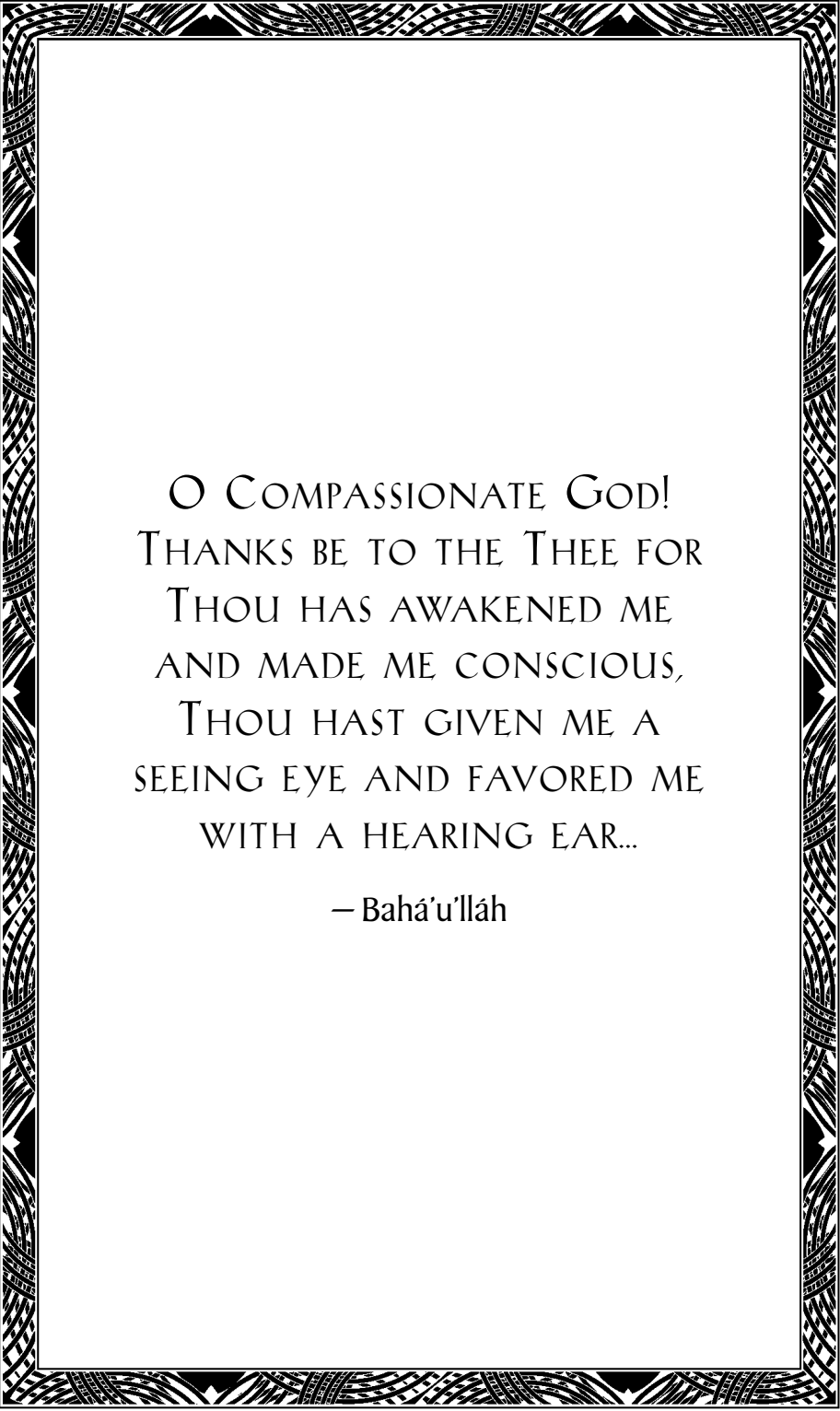
would go on to read several Bahá'í books which all confirmed what that first afternoon revealed to me: That here I had found truth. One of the outstanding books I read was called *Thief in the Night* and it is one of the most amazing books that I have ever read. It gives proof from the Bible that Bahá'u'lláh is who He says He is—the return of the Spirit of Christ and the Manifestation of God on earth.

In the summer of 1989 I was 14 years old. I was granted the bounty of participating in a Bahá'í youth annual travel-teaching project known as “Sparks of Peace.” Bahá'í youth from all of the Caribbean islands met in Antigua for a week to prepare for a month of service. That week was the most important of my life. We stayed at a camp on the beach. We lived in tents and were not allowed to watch television or listen to the radios. We also had to cook our own food. When I first arrived at the camp, I saw several people hugging each other like they were old friends. I only knew one other person there and he was a youth from Barbados. My personality is naturally that of a stoic reserved person. I always thought it was weird when I first met Bahá'ís because guys would hug guys. That seemed very weird at the time. I wouldn't even hug my own mother! People at the camp spoke English, Spanish, French, Creole, and Patois. There were blacks, whites, Hispanics, and Indians.

We awoke in the morning and said dawn prayers together. We cooked together, sang together, and did our chores together. We had a group of wonderful older Bahá'ís who helped us deepen on the teachings and history of the Bahá'í Faith. We read a book called *The Dawn-Breakers*, which was filled with true stories of deeds of great heroism by the early believers that stirred our hearts beyond measure. We learned about the spiritual virtues that we needed to live our lives and we worked hard on achieving unity.

I was there a week and at the end of the week we were splitting up into groups to travel around the Caribbean and do service. We were all going to meet back together in a few weeks for a Caribbean Bahá'í Youth conference. It was about 3 A.M. when we were all getting onto a bus that would drive us to the airport. It was totally dark outside and I looked around and everyone was hugging each other and crying. To my surprise I also began hugging everyone—even GUYS! When I got on that bus, I sat there and tears came to my eyes. I realized that I loved these people. I truly loved them and I had only known them for one week. I would not have thought it possible to develop such love for people who were total strangers just one week earlier.

That experience helped me tremendously to realize one thing and that is world unity is possible. It was the first of many experiences I have had, which demonstrate this truth. We were a group of extremely diverse people, speaking different languages, coming from different religious backgrounds, but we became totally united through our love for Bahá'u'lláh. ❀



O COMPASSIONATE GOD!
THANKS BE TO THEE FOR
THOU HAS AWAKENED ME
AND MADE ME CONSCIOUS,
THOU HAST GIVEN ME A
SEEING EYE AND FAVORED ME
WITH A HEARING EAR...

— Bahá'u'lláh

THE MOMENT I WAS CONCEIVED

Adelia Ellis ❁ U.S.A.

Adelia was born in Hartsville, South Carolina on November 26, 1974, the first of five children. She formally declared her belief in Bahá'u'lláh on November 26, 1989, at the age of fifteen while attending the Maxwell International Bahá'í School in British Columbia, Canada. She currently works as a Teacher in South Korea.

I became a Bahá'í the moment I was conceived; my parents, both having declared their heartfelt devotion in Bahá'u'lláh, passed on to my soul this same depth of love. I do believe that while in the womb, as I developed my physical limbs, my parents' youthful energy to serve Bahá'u'lláh flowed into my veins by the very cord that provided me material sustenance. I was born with a love and undeniable bond to the Faith of Bahá'u'lláh.

Then, as a child, I became a Bahá'í again as my love for Bahá'u'lláh was reinforced with knowledge and the example of my parents. I remember saying prayers with my parents, sitting at the kitchen table with a prayer book in my hands as my mother coached me through memorizing prayers while she cooked. From birth I was surrounded by the culture of the Bahá'í community in South Carolina. I fell asleep listening to singing and laughter. My parents hosted bonfires at our home deep in the country where food was served in abundance. I cannot remember the words that were said or which prayers were read or what songs were sung. What I do remember is a *feeling*. A deep feeling of being in a place where there were only spirits. It was as if

their bodies were invisible and the only thing in the room was pure love and joy. My father would take me to the homes of Bahá'ís who lived down dirt roads, many of whom had no running water, plumbing, or electricity. We would sit and pass the time on their porches or in their yards. They were so happy to see my father and I. My father was not uncomfortable with their poverty. Nor did he feel they were less dignified or intelligent because of this condition. My father, being of African descent, and my mother, being of Irish/Italian descent, both accepted the dignity of people regardless of their material status, race, or educational background. It was these people, the poor and meek of the Earth, that helped to connect my heart to the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh's message concerning the oneness of humanity. This is when and where I learned how to be a Bahá'í.

At the age of 15, while far away at the Maxwell International Bahá'í School in British Columbia, I declared my belief in Bahá'u'lláh as the Messenger of God for this day and accepted the infallible example of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. I had no idea what I was doing. On a heart level, I knew without a doubt that I was a Bahá'í. On an intellectual level I did not know the enormity of what I had devoted my life to. However, over time I became more spiritually mature as a Bahá'í. I was now responsible for the feeding and sustaining of my own spiritual well being.

I am on the threshold of becoming a Bahá'í yet again. Many years have passed since I formally declared my belief in Bahá'u'lláh and many tests and trials have assailed me. I have come to know what it means to weep, to laugh, to die, to love, to doubt, to fear, and to have courage. When I became a Bahá'í as an embryo—so tiny and insignificant—I had already committed my life to crisis and victory. I have never known my life in any other way. Now I am again on the threshold of becoming a Bahá'í. I do believe that

becoming a Bahá'í happens over and over again in one's life. It happens to me as my soul and my mind acquiesce to higher and higher levels of sacrifice, of spiritual discipline, and of an ever-deeper faithfulness to the Covenant. This acquiescence comes when the mind and spirit give way to the higher Power and we conform our lives to God's will. This death of one's self is very hard to achieve and cannot be rushed. This is a lesson I have learned over the years in this process of crisis and victory. Victory is assured for those who strive and I am striving. Becoming a Bahá'í is a very personal thing and is just the beginning of my long journey toward God. ♣

STRUGGLES WITH LIGHT & DARKNESS

Jesse B. Fish ♣ U.S.A.

Jesse was born in Los Angeles on November 5, 1977. After seeing the Dance Diversity Workshop perform on his college campus, he became a member of the group and eventually declared in Seattle on July 25, 1998. He currently resides in Washington State and his hobbies include dancing, singing, writing, and outdoors activities.

Staring at the ceiling, and laying on my back one evening when I was feeling particularly lost, I remember repeating “I want to be good, I want to be good, I want to be . . .” over and over again. Few others knew that I was suffering a dark period of my life that extended into the beginning of my freshman year at the University of Washington. In fact, many of my high school friends thought I was an extremely happy-go lucky guy after achieving a “full ride” through college and being voted “student of the year” among many other awards. What they didn’t know was that I suffered from low self-esteem, depression, feelings of inadequacy, and at times, self-hate.

My parents were of Chinese and Anglo-American ancestry. Although I was the product of an interracial marriage, for as long as I can remember, we lived in a relatively middle class Caucasian neighborhood. From time to time, I tried to drop hints to my parents about my unhappiness and the emptiness in my life, but they could not fill the void in my heart.

Around that time, I began experimenting with a couple different churches, hoping to find fulfillment and answers to basic questions about the reality of my existence and purpose for being. I studied the New and Old Testaments, and participated in fellowship and peer support groups at the local St. Peter's Catholic Church and the Church of Christ. For a while, this brought solace to my heart, but the slight feelings of euphoria eventually vanished and I arrived back at where I started. I realized that there were various things I had read in the Bible that did not jibe with the real world. For instance, there were certain passages and concepts I was expected to believe as literal without question. This call for blind faith was more than I could bear so I gradually began to pull away from church activities and discussions altogether.

During my college years, I was "out at sea" for a little while, struggling with my own inner demons, and between what I felt were the forces of light and darkness. While my higher self struggled to overcome my lower impulses, there was a particular day that changed my outlook on life. I still remember this day as if it were yesterday. The thought that came to mind was that my life had two roads to traverse over. The two roads for me symbolized either the paths of good or evil. I realized that I had to make a choice of which road I wanted to take. After pondering the two choices in my head, I decided to build up my resolve to pursue the positive path.

Very shortly thereafter, I learned that the Bellevue, Washington-based and Bahá'í-inspired Diversity Dance Workshop (DDW) would be performing at the Ethnic Cultural Center on campus. My heart leapt when I saw their poster. When I went to see the performance, their dramatic dance-theater repertoire powerfully and evocatively addressing issues of race, class, gender, substance abuse, and violence, compelled me to join the group for a year and perform at schools through the United States and overseas. I

decided to talk with my parents about taking a year out of school to do this.

I was juggling a 30-hour a week job analyzing data for the Polar Science Center of the Applied Physics Lab and was writing basic computer programs while on road trips to various performance venues. Near the end of summer, I started dropping hints to my parents to see what they thought about me taking the year off from school in order to tour with the DDW. They were less than pleased with my insistence upon joining this group, partly out of fear that I would lose eligibility for scholarships, and also that it could slow down my chances for future job possibilities. The other fear my family had was that they associated the Bahá'ís with what they felt was a risky and misguided religious cult.

I did my best to present a well-reasoned and objective response to their fears by writing a list of pros and cons concerning my future involvement with the DDW for the 1996-97 academic year. It helped, but I still did not have my parents' full blessings. Nonetheless, I decided to join the group for one year and hoped for the best. I still remember when I first joined DDW: Someone asked at my first dance practice whether I was a Bahá'í or not. "Ba-what?" was my response. This began my social and spiritual education among a hip, diverse, funny, intelligent, talented, and outgoing group of mostly Bahá'í youth.

Every day my fascination with the Bahá'í Faith grew. Not only did the basic social and spiritual principles answer many of my most fundamental beliefs, the clarity of its teachings, the soundness of its arguments, its aesthetics, and its unifying nature left me with no other choice than to walk in the shadow of its beauty. Most people assumed I was a Bahá'í long before I officially "declared" as one, but then I also made no secret of my conviction, in the privacy of my

prayers, that I believed in Bahá'u'lláh as the supreme Manifestation of God for this age.

It took me about two years before I felt fully prepared to make my declaration “official” and public. Signing the card, in itself, was a barrier to me until a member of the Diversity Dance Theater helped me to see things differently. This happened on the evening of July 25, 1998, while we were in Frankfurt, Germany. It was the day before I returned home from a four-month study abroad experience in Central Europe. I realized that I would, in fact, be making a series of regular and successive declarations of my faith, every time I was confronted by moral decisions great and small. It was in those moments that I had to choose whether or not I would remain a follower of the Glory of God (i.e. Bahá'u'lláh) and a lover of His precepts. Thank God I did not have to be perfect before enlisting as a Bahá'í! Rather, every exertion to follow Bahá'u'lláh's teachings accelerated my spiritual growth in the acquisition and development of virtues.

There are many, many educators who helped me along the way in developing my spiritual awareness. One youth in particular was Zorana Rinaldi. She was almost 19 years old when she died in a tragic car accident on December 17, 1996. In the short time I knew her, it was not so much the use of her words that affected me, but the strength of her character that served as an example of what it means to be a Bahá'í. After her passing, her memory helped to sustain in me my conviction and commitment to the Faith and its teachings. Thanks be to God, her inspiration brought me closer to the Master and the Perfect Exemplar of the Cause of God, 'Abdu'l-Bahá. ❀

WRITINGS ON THE WALL

Guadalupe Flores ❁ Honduras

Guadalupe is of Mayan and Garifuna heritage and was born in San Pedro Sula, Honduras on November 2, 1951. She first came in contact with the Bahá'í Faith when her sister married a Bahá'í who came to Honduras as a pioneer. She later joined the Bahá'í Faith in 1995. She is a great lover of the outdoors and currently works in a bakery in the town of San Ignacio.

Dale Morrow and his wife came to Honduras as pioneers in the 70's. They lived a humble existence in a remote village called Olancho in the mountains of Honduras. They taught many people the Faith, amongst them my family. I was not living there at the time, as I was raised by another family in the city of San Pedro Sula.

As a teenager I visited my family in Olancho when they were attending Baha'i meetings. Since I was somewhat estranged from my family, I didn't enjoy or interact with the Baha'is much. As a result, I did not know much about what the Bahá'ís believed in at the time. Soon after that, a Bahá'í named Tim Thurber came to Honduras as a pioneer and married my sister.

I moved to Guatemala after some years, during which time I lost contact with my family in Honduras and lost all contact with the Baha'is. Subsequently, I moved to Belize where I found myself living next door to a Baha'i Center! I

saw the comings and goings of the Baha'is, but I never got involved with them. I still was not interested in any religion, or in God. God, I felt, had disappointed me, so why should I look to religion? Even so, I loved nature and spent much time in the outdoors enjoying its beauty and analyzing the happenings at the farm. I took immense joy in observing the birth of tiny hummingbirds, the development of pupae into butterflies, following the tracks of tapir, and a host of other wondrous and complex events.

Eventually I went to work for a family in San Ignacio town. Lo and behold, the family was Baha'i! The person I worked for placed quotations from the Writings on the walls throughout the house. I kept reading them. At the same time, she would give me special quotations, play Baha'i music, and answer my questions about the Faith very patiently, but without any pressure. In that home I felt that the walls spoke to me. Eventually, I realized that Baha'u'llah was calling me and I could no longer escape Him. I eventually joined the Bahá'í Faith sometime in 1995.

After becoming a Baha'i, I felt a need to regain unity with my family, so I went back to Honduras and found out that my sister and mother had become Baha'is too! It was a very sweet reunion. Now I am living with my daughter and son-in-law who are now also Baha'is. What a wonderful day we live in! ❁

YOU ARE My CHILD

Barbara McAtee ✿ U.S.A.

Barbara first heard about the Faith from a classmate in high school and borrowed the book *God Loves Laughter*. She became a Bahá'í in 1966. She currently resides in Kansas City, Missouri.

People consider me to be of European-American descent. However, I am 1/16th Native American. I come from Irish, Scottish, Dutch, and Cherokee descent, as far as I know. My English ancestor came over on the Mayflower, as a Church of England missionary who wanted to teach Christianity to the Indians. He performed the wedding ceremony for Pocahontas and John Smith. After that, his descendants had close ties with Native Americans, and eventually one of them married a Native American woman. I have often felt that I was guided by my ancestors, long before I learned about any of them. I grew up in a middle-to-upper class suburb of Kansas City. It was very boring, because there was absolutely no cultural life in the suburbs in the early 1960s. Just miles and miles of houses and all in a row.

Ever since I was a young child, I was fascinated by religion. It was a kind of quest for me to discover the true meaning of life. When I was five years old, I had a dream. In the dream I was asleep on my bed. I was awakened by the sound of a deep, powerful voice calling to me from the front porch. I instantly knew it was Christ who called. I jumped out of bed and started to run to him. I was stopped at my bedroom door by my mother. She asked where I thought I

was going. I told her I had to see Jesus. He was calling me to come to him. She said, “You can’t go to Jesus looking like that. You are still wearing your pajamas.” In dismay, I ran over to the rack where my clothes were hung. I started to pull a dress off its hanger. Mother said, “You can’t wear that dress, it has a stain on it.” So, I tried to pull another dress off the hanger. She said, “You can’t wear that one, either. See, the hem is torn. This is what you get for being so hard on your clothes!” (I was sort of a tomboy, rambunctious, and always in trouble!) Suddenly, Jesus called out in a loud, angry voice, “I said for Barbara to come to me, NOW!” At that my mother let me go. I ran to the front door and opened it. There stood Jesus, surrounded by a bright golden light. He reached out and held me in his arms. He said, “You are my child, and I will always love you, just as you are.” Needless to say, that dream made a powerful impression on me! In fact, the dream seemed to recur at special times during my life when I needed reassurance.

After that, I began walking to whatever church was nearest to home. We moved often, so I went to many different churches, including Lutheran, Baptist, Mormon, Presbyterian, and Unity. My parents did not go to church, so I went on my own. They thought it was a bit odd, especially since I developed a habit of sleepwalking with a Bible in my hands. But they figured it would not hurt to let me go to church. They belonged to the Presbyterian Church where they were married. So one day, the Presbyterian minister paid us a call. My mother did not invite him in, but they talked on the porch. I overheard the conversation, part of which concerned me. The minister thought that I should be baptized. My mother told him that she did not believe in baptizing a child who was too young to make a choice for herself. She emphatically told him that I should be allowed to choose for myself, when I was older, whether I wanted to be baptized, whether I wanted to join a church, and what church that would be. I never discussed that conversation

with my mother, but I also never forgot it. I knew from that day forward that I had a very personal choice to make.

When I was ten years old, I “went forward” in the Baptist Church and “asked to be saved.” I was henceforth dunked in a watering trough on a Sunday evening, and thought the minister was going to drown me, because he held me under for a long time while he prayed. I guess he thought I needed a lot of prayer! I read the Bible avidly. I attended Sunday school and the Sunday evening “training union.” I eagerly asked many questions, taxing the patience of my teachers. It began to bother me that they did not have all the answers. Too many things in the Bible seemed contradictory.

When I was a sophomore at Shawnee Mission West High School in Overland Park, Kansas, I happened to sit next to a classmate named Margie (Margaret) Walker. We had several classes together, because my last name (Whitaker) also started with the letter “W.” I had just met her that fall and did not really know her. I noticed an interesting book on top of her other school books. We always carried a huge stack of books from class to class because we did not have time to go to our lockers between classes. The book I noticed was called *God Loves Laughter* by William Sears. I asked her what the book was about. She said it was about the Bahá’í Faith. I asked what was that. She said it was a faith that taught the oneness of religion, the oneness of mankind, and the equality of men and women. I was puzzled and curious, because I had been reading books about comparative religion the summer before school started. I had not come across the Bahá’í Faith in my readings, and that bothered me. I asked to borrow the book when she was finished. She promised she would let me read it, but I had to remind her several times before she brought it back to school. I absolutely loved the book! I remembered Mr. Sears from a television program I used to watch on Sunday afternoons. And Bill Sears spoke directly to my heart! After

that, I could not get enough Bahá'í books to read. I read *Thief in the Night*, *Wine of Astonishment*, *Paris Talks*, *Some Answered Questions*, and *God Passes By*. I began saying the daily obligatory prayer, and observed the Fast for the first time (March 1963). Then Margie invited me to spend the night with her and attend a fireside at her house. The family room where it was held was filled with a dozen or more youth and adults, none of whom I knew. Still I was precocious. I was the only one who spoke up, and badgered the speaker with question after question.

This was the first time in my life I had ever attended a racially mixed event. Public accommodations and housing were still very segregated at that time. African Americans did not live in our suburbs. The speaker was African-American, but I did not even realize it at the time, because he did not look like the stereotypical image of a black man that I had been conditioned to expect. All I knew was that he was probably the most intelligent and articulate man I had ever met. His presentation sent goose bumps up and down my spine.

I went home the next day and prayed to Jesus to show me a sign. I knew in my heart that Bahá'u'lláh was the Return of Christ, but suddenly I felt a panic. This faith had power. I could feel it. I wanted to make sure Satan was not tempting me to make a mistake. I asked Christ to show me whether this was the truth, and whether Bahá'u'lláh was really who He said He was. A short time later, Margie took me to a Sunday deepening class in Kansas City. I had never been to that part of the city. The meeting was even more integrated than the fireside. People there were from many varied backgrounds. They were reading the words of Bahá'u'lláh, from the *Kitáb-i-Iqán*. Hearing those words read aloud for the first time sent me into a state of ecstasy.

That afternoon, I went to work in the retail jewelry section of a department store. The manager had a strict policy that more than one employee had to be at work in

that area at all times. But for some reason that afternoon, I was left alone while the others were on break. I watched with curiosity while a tall Middle Eastern looking man in his late 40's walked into the department. At his side was a very short elderly woman dressed all in black, with a black scarf tied a round her head. I surmised that she was probably his mother. They walked to a counter to look at jewelry. I overheard their conversation, though I could not understand a word they said. Without any forethought, I suddenly blurted out a question: "Are you speaking Farsi?" I remember thinking that it reminded me a little of French, which I did not speak, but it definitely was not French! I had never heard Farsi spoken before, but something told me they were Persian. The man looked startled and asked me in English why I wanted to know. Without thinking, the words came out of my mouth. I said the language he spoke was so beautiful it had to be Farsi and that Farsi was the language of the Blessed Beauty, Bahá'u'lláh, who came from Persia, and that I hoped to go to their land someday to walk in Bahá'u'lláh's footsteps. The man looked stunned. He acknowledged that he had been speaking Farsi, and was from Iran. The woman, speaking in Farsi, demanded to know what he was talking about. I listened as he answered her in Farsi. I never heard him say "Bahá'í" but he did use the word "Bábí" several times. The woman suddenly looked horrified! She pointed at me and said, "No! Bábí bad! Bábí bad!" Then she spit at me and backed out of the department, as if she were afraid to turn her back on me. The man turned and walked after her.

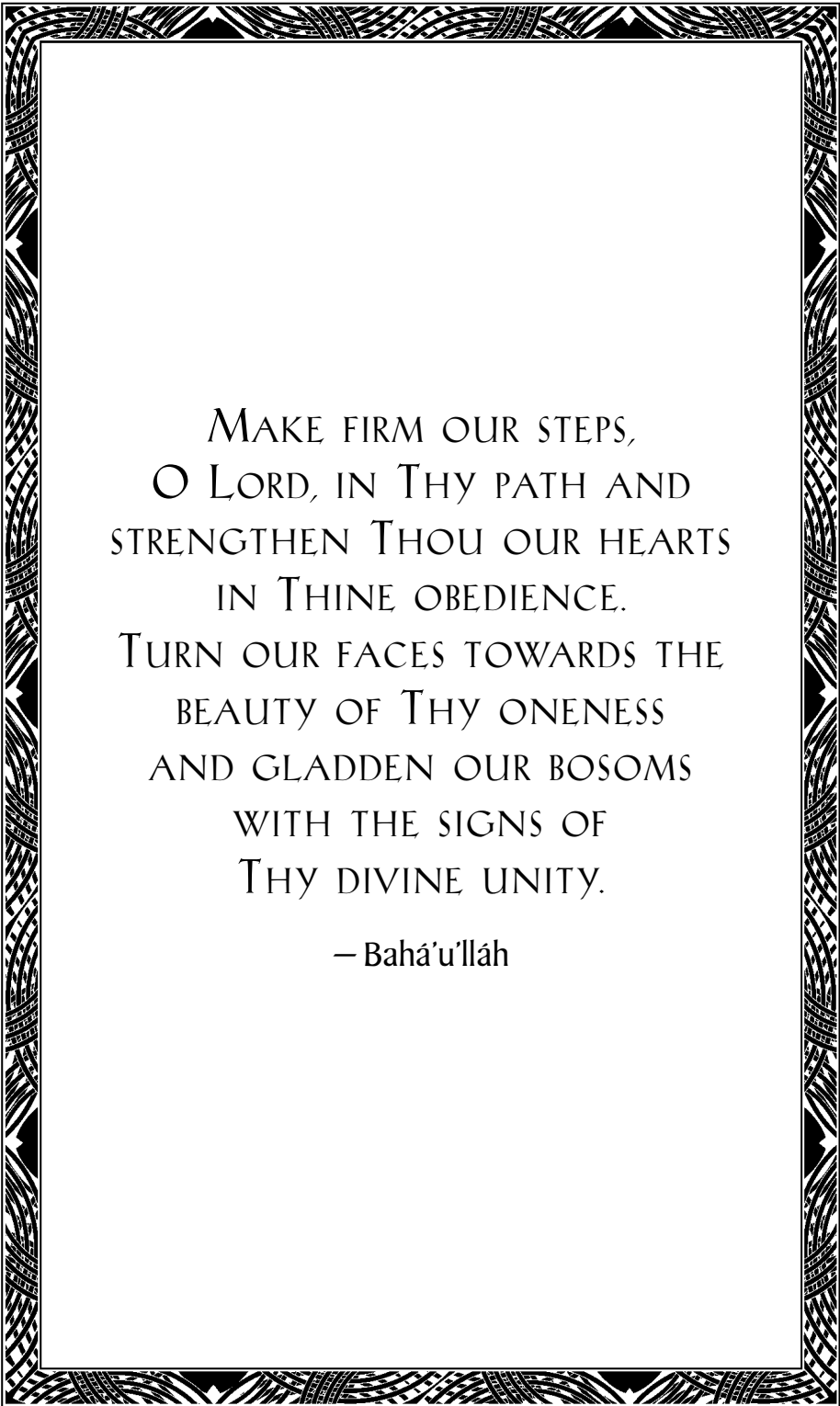
I was not the least bit upset. In fact, I thought it was amazing, and pretty close to a miracle! I completely understood the woman's reaction, having read about the persecution of the Bábís in *God Passes By*. I remembered how Bahá'u'lláh had magnanimously let a woman throw a rock at Him, because she believed she was doing the right thing. I felt blessed to have been "persecuted" myself, short

and painless though it was! Needless to say, I did not make a sale to that couple! Later that afternoon, the man returned to apologize to me. He said his mother was old and did not understand. I graciously told him I quite understood and accepted his apology. I said that I knew that Bábís and Bahá'ís were considered heretics in his country, and that she had been taught that they were bad. I told him that maybe someday he and she would understand how blessed his country was because it was the birthplace of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh. Again, the words just came to me from somewhere else when I spoke. They were not coming from my conscious mind. He asked how I knew about this. He seemed to think it strange to find an American teenager who knew something about his country. I told him that Bahá'ís lived all over the world, and that he should visit the Bahá'í House of Worship in Wilmette, Illinois, just north of Chicago on the shore of Lake Michigan. I just happened to have a small color photo of the House of Worship in my pocket. It had been given to me at the deepening. I handed him the picture. He looked at it with fascination and handed it back to me. That night, I had the audacity to pray to Jesus once more, asking Him to give me another sign. Jesus was kind to me. That night I had my dream again. This time, I looked again at the man on the porch who held me and said, "I love you, just as you are." This time, I saw the face of 'Abdu'l-Bahá smiling at me! The next morning, all doubt had vanished and I knew I had found the truth. It was the most joyous feeling I have ever known. However, for many years, I did not sign a declaration card and become an official member of the local Bahá'í community.

I attended Emporia State Teacher's College in the fall of 1965. It was a small, sleepy campus where my parents thought I would not get into trouble. They wanted to make sure I did not go to a school like the University of Kansas in Lawrence, where some of my older friends were stirring things up by

protesting for civil rights for African Americans. Well, of course, I did not stay out of trouble. Even though I had not declared myself a Bahá'í, I held integrated fireside discussions once a week in the Student Union. As far as I know, those were the first of their kind at the school, where Black students stayed in a segregated area of the dormitories.

Feeling too constrained in Emporia, I moved to Topeka, Kansas, in January 1966, and enrolled at Washburn University. I soon learned that there was a very active Bahá'í community in Topeka. In fact, it was the oldest community in Kansas, and one of the oldest in the country. They ran a Sunday morning program on one of the radio stations. It was a series of discussions on various topics, lead by none other than Bill Sears, whose books were the first Bahá'í books I had read. One Sunday, when I first heard the broadcast, I was excited! I had been the only Bahá'í in Emporia (although it was not official as I had not yet signed a declaration card). I called the telephone number that was broadcast on the program. Don Newby answered the phone when I called. I simply said, "I want to join the Bahá'í Faith. I have been a Bahá'í for several years, but have never signed a card." I wish I could have seen his face. I heard a short pause, an intake of air, and then he asked where I had heard of the Faith. I told him my story. He invited me to attend their devotional meeting the following Sunday. It was held at the home of May and Paul Brown, who were away from home, serving at Green Acre Bahá'í School at the time. Don and Genay Newby were "house-sitting" for them. The day I signed my card, Fred Cairns also signed his. The community had a special celebration for us. Cora Schulte and Genay Newby became my spiritual mothers. They tenderly nurtured me and very generously overlooked my faults. The first book they gave me was *Prescription for Living*. That book helped to integrate me into the community by helping me learn how to live the Bahá'í life. ❀



MAKE FIRM OUR STEPS,
O LORD, IN THY PATH AND
STRENGTHEN THOU OUR HEARTS
IN THINE OBEDIENCE.
TURN OUR FACES TOWARDS THE
BEAUTY OF THY ONENESS
AND GLADDEN OUR BOSOMS
WITH THE SIGNS OF
THY DIVINE UNITY.

— Bahá'u'lláh

DO YOU WANT TO SIGN

Jennifer Hall ✿ U.S.A.

J*ennifer was born in Bellingham, Washington on September 22, 1977. She became a Baha'i on February 29, 1996 and later served at the Baha'i Home in Wilmette, Illinois as a volunteer. She is currently living and working in China.*

I was raised in a Pentecostal Christian Church until I was about 9 years old. We went to church often, at least 4 times a week. The dynamic sermons, the vibrant singing, the joyful music, and the transcendental moments of seeing people in the congregation talking in tongues and dancing uncontrollably to the beat of the Holy Ghost, were all collective experiences that captivated my young soul. I loved the whole experience. I loved Jesus. And I loved God! So when my mother stopped going to church when I was about 9 years old, I continued my relationship with God by going to other churches with my friends.

As I visited other churches, I searched to find God, but gradually, all of my searching came to naught. I gradually stopped going to church after I became a teenager. I became very rebellious toward my parents and began to engage in a lot of unhealthy activities. Throughout these difficult times I always believed in God and prayed that He would keep me safe. My prayers repeatedly were deals I made with God, many of which sounded like “If I do not get caught this time, I promise I will not do it again.” Sometimes I kept promises,

but most often, I continued to act out in ways that hurt myself and the people I hung around.

At age fifteen while I was a freshman in high school, powerful spiritual forces were at work in my life, slowly leading me away from the decadent lifestyle that I had been indulging in as a misdirected teen. Just a month before high school began, a voice in my head spoke to me saying, “You’ve always wanted to go to college, live a good life, and do things for people. This is the beginning of the rest of your life.” I listened and decided to start relinquishing my unhealthy behaviors. One of those behaviors was prejudice, prejudice that I had learned as a teenager. When I was a child I loved everyone without discrimination, but as a troubled teen I learned to hate others in order to be accepted. By the grace of God, my heart spoke to me, telling me to change my ways, and so I decided to join a committee for the Martin Luther King, Jr. assembly program. My first purpose in joining this non-violent program committee was to fulfill a committee requirement for a leadership class, and to make amends for the prejudice and racist acts I had performed in the past. Little did I know that being on this committee would bring me back to the spiritual path I had forsaken years before, and reunite me with spiritual teachings that I felt were compatible with my inner spirit.

While serving on the Martin Luther King, Jr. program committee, I met two girls named Mojan and Mojdeh Sami, who proposed the idea of bringing the Vancouver Bahá’í Youth Dance Workshop (from British Columbia, Canada) for a performance at our school. We were told that they performed dance themes that had to do with ending prejudice, the equality of women and men, as well as other topics that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. espoused. The committee decided to invite the Workshop to perform at the

assembly in January. The Sami sisters were two Bahá'í youth whom I had been acquainted with since I was six years old, but I never knew they were Bahá'ís. Actually I did not really know that the word Bahá'í had anything to do with religion until a few days before the assembly was to take place. Mojan asked me if I would introduce the Workshop by reading a few lines she had typed on a piece of paper. At that time in 1993 it was permissible to speak about religion in our school. I remember the school newspaper mentioning something about Bahá'u'lláh and that the Bahá'í Faith was a religion. I read the article and agreed with most of the teachings that the Bahá'í Faith espoused. On the day of the school assembly I read the introduction in front of 1,300 students. I spoke the name of Bahá'u'lláh for the first time. After the introduction, the Workshop danced and I cried after watching them perform various skits that had to do with overcoming prejudice and hate. I knew that the messages the Workshop conveyed throughout their performances were based on the truth and I felt that I had always believed in it.

After the Workshop finished their performance, I was among some of the committee members who went out for pizza with the Workshop members. At the end of the school day there was a fireside in the music building that I attended. During an assembly committee follow-up meeting, I remember a brief conversation with Mojan during which she gave me some Workshop cards (which I kept for several years) and invited me to come to Workshop rehearsal with her anytime. I remember another conversation in the hallway once between classes where she invited me to call her anytime I wanted to attend a Bahá'í gathering. For reasons I cannot remember, I did not take the opportunity to go to any Bahá'í meetings or Workshop performances. But

when the Workshop came back to our school two more times in the next two years, I always spent time with the members in fellowship and prayer.

A brief period of only months passed from the time I was introduced to the Faith until the time I was actively reading books about the Faith. I read books by the Central Figures of the Faith, and also read the Holy Scriptures of many of the world's religions. I found most of the books in one particular used bookstore called Michael's and others at the public library. About two months after the Martin Luther King, Jr. assembly program, I gave a presentation about the unity of religion in my freshman honors English class. I used some controversial poetry that denounced the clergy of Christendom and some of Nietzsche's Thus Spake Zarathustra to get my point across. During the question and answer period one of my classmates asked exactly what religion I was and I replied, "If I had to say I was any religion, I would say I was a Bahá'í."

For the next two years, my only encounters with the Bahá'ís were when I briefly met with Workshop members. By the third year of my investigation, I started telling everyone about the Bahá'í Faith. In my mind I was a Bahá'í but I had not signed my card. To a lesser extent I started acting on Bahá'í laws and principles. My best friend Heather MacDonald happened to work on the yearbook staff with another Bahá'í at our school named Mojdeh Ghaemi. Heather knew Mojdeh was a Bahá'í and informed her I was telling everyone that I was a Bahá'í. After Heather had told Mojdeh several times that I claimed to be a Bahá'í, Mojdeh finally just asked if I wanted to hang out with other Bahá'ís. I eventually started hanging out with Mojdeh and her Bahá'í friends, some of whom were members of the Washington University Bahá'í Club.

The last week of February 1996—during Ayyam-i-Há—I spent several evenings with the Western Washington University Bahá’í youth. By this time I was a senior in high school. One night there was a fireside that I attended and I happened to answer a question that one of the seekers posed to the Bahá’ís. I had already read so many Bahá’í books by this time, including *The Kitáb-i-Íqán*, *Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, *The Seven Valleys and The Four Valleys*, and parts of *Some Answered Questions*. I naturally felt comfortable answering questions because by that time I had been around many Bahá’ís and believed the teachings as the truth.

Near the end of the evening, Mojdeh Sami looked at me and said, “I don’t want to pressure you, but do you want to sign your Bahá’í card?”

I replied, “Sure, what’s that?”

Two evenings later, at a dinner gathering honoring youth, I signed my card with certainty and with much joy. ❁

FOR ALL THE RIGHT REASONS

Ida Spruill ❁ U.S.A.

Ida is of African descent and was born in rural South Carolina in 1950. She is the youngest of sixteen siblings, and has traveled and lived all over the world. After returning to South Carolina in 1986, she met a Bahá'í couple that introduced her to the Bahá'í Faith. She became a Bahá'í in 1994. She currently resides in the city of Charleston.

I was always inquisitive and a risk taker. During my growing up years, I was heavily indoctrinated with the African Methodist teachings because my father used to be a Minister. Even though I spent my entire childhood in the Church, I was drawn to and investigated other religions. I was especially drawn to Black Muslims in American because of the respect they had for the family and the protection they gave each other against the white power structure during the 1960's. However, my loyalty and my allegiance to my Father prevented me from totally submerging myself into the study and practice of this religion. The other reason I could not join was because my husband was not in favor of abstaining from pork and smoking. These were two things that Black Muslims were required to keep out of their lives. So my search continued.

While I wished to join a cause like the Black Muslims that could make me feel proud of who I was, I did not subscribe to their doctrine that all Whites were devils.

Sometimes, I felt that way because racism was so overt and legalized all throughout the south. But it didn't make any logical sense. So over the years, I continued to search for spiritual truth.

I marched and protested in the streets! I cried! I studied and traveled overseas. However, I did not find what I was looking for. While overseas, I happened to meet an African man who told me that all men are human beings and related. He was not a Bahá'í. After coming home to South Carolina, I began working in Marion County. It is there that I met a nice white couple from Florence, South Carolina. Through them, I found out about the Bahá'í Faith and started attending events at Louis Gregory Institute. This was a Bahá'í school named after a famous black Bahá'í named Louis Gregory. I attended all kinds of functions at the Louis Gregory Institute and eventually met the famous Bahá'í Jazz artist, Dizzy Gillespie. Despite all of these good experiences, I still had my hang ups about becoming a Bahá'í. I was interested, but not quite ready to join.

My past was still too painful and I was not ready to embrace white people. I was a wounded soldier from the Civil Rights era and still had too many battle scars that had not fully healed. I loved my culture, my people, and was proud of my heritage. My thinking at the time was that the unity of mankind didn't promote ethnic pride or so I thought. However, as my friendships with the Bahá'ís grew, I began to find out that my ethnic pride did not have to be eradicated in order to achieve inter-racial unity. Bahá'ís were encouraged to preserve and appreciate the many cultures of the world.

After I investigated the Bahá'í Faith on my own, I had no choice but to become a Bahá'í because I realized that blacks were valued as a people and as a race. Our suffering

in America from racial inequality was acknowledged in the sacred writings and we — along with all of the other people of color — are encouraged to contribute and be involved as equals at every level of its administrative order. I became a Bahá'í because the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh are a catalyst for healing the many ills in society. The teachings were also a first step to wiping out the suspicion I had in my heart toward the white race. Ultimately, I became a Bahá'í because I consider myself a World Citizen. ❁

DANCING INTO THE GARDEN OF LIFE

Judith Auslander ♣ U.S.A.

Judith was born into a Jewish family but later became a Christian. After being invited to a series of Bahá'í events, she became a Bahá'í on September 21, 1981. She currently resides in Eugene, Oregon.

I remember as a young child having a dream several nights in a row in which an old man would come to visit me. He would stand at the foot of my bed, and I would always sit up to talk to him. We would communicate without words. He told me to call him Grandfather. I never felt any fear at his presence. When I would get up the next morning and tell my mother about it, she did not believe me. But I knew it was something special.

I did not grow up with religion. Although I was born Jewish, my father's working late on Friday nights precluded us from getting involved in the Temple. I am sure there was more to it than that, but that is what I was told. However, this never satisfied me, and I was constantly thinking about religion and God. I would pray all the time, and often sit in the empty bathtub, with all my clothes on, and pray.

After I became an adult, I married a man who did not believe in religion. We had a son and when asked by the hospital what religion he was, we said a HeBap (Hebrew/Baptist). In 1980 my husband and I separated. This started my search for religion. I started out with meditation

and past life readings. I then joined the Polarity Alive Fellowship. This held a lot of interest for me, but something was missing. I decided I really wanted to be more “main stream”; in other words, a Born Again Christian. About this time I started volunteering at the Crisis Clinic in Everett, Washington. My trainer was a woman named Marian who was learning about the Bahá’í Faith from her boyfriend. She asked if I wanted to join her at a meeting. I said, “Bah-what?” She told me a little about it, and I decided to check it out. I met a wonderful woman who had met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá when she was a child. I sat next to her and was awed by her story. As I listened I fell in love with the Faith. It was everything I had always believed in. When I was shown a photo of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the old memory about the man who used to come visit me at the foot of my bed came back to me.

I started going to a lot of Bahá’í get-togethers. One of these was a picnic that was held each week. There I met lots of other Bahá’ís. They would say prayers, and talk about the teachings of the Faith but I still wasn’t sure if I was serious enough to join. Nonetheless, I loved the way the Bahá’ís had so much fun without alcohol or drugs. About this same time, I started following around a Bahá’í singing group called The Janai Singers. These people became like family, and I went to many of the Firesides they attended all over the state of Washington. I also went to many other Firesides. One of my favorites was the one held at the home of Bob Wilson. I went to concerts, talks, video showings, and anything else that I had time to attend.

I was learning about the Faith, but still I had this desire to join something “normal.” When I asked one of my Born Again Christian friends to read a Bahá’í pamphlet, I was shocked when she said that the Devil was in it because the words all jumped around on the page. I knew this was . . .

well . . . dumb. I knew then, that I could not fight the Bahá'í Faith any longer. It was what I believed.

What made me sign my card was a dance. I wanted to go to a dance with my friends and devoted teachers, Michael and Barbara Crader. I was told that it was for Bahá'ís only. I later found out that this was a mistake and that only Bahá'ís could pay if they happened to bring guests. It was the 5th of September 1981. I had been searching for 9 months. Since the only people who could come to the dance were Bahá'ís, I decided to declare right on the spot. When the person at the door asked me if I was a Bahá'í, I told them, “Yes, I’m a Bahá'í.” My friends Michael and Barbara were totally shocked and caught by surprise. They asked me, “Are you sure?” After letting them know that I was sure about my decision, that dance had become more than a dance. It became a celebration of my life as a new Bahá'í. I consider that night as one of the high points in my adult life—it was my dance into a new garden of life. ❀

THE WATER OF LIFE

Naledi Raspberry ❁

Naledi is an African-American woman with 1/4 America Indian heritage. She is part Lumbee, Choctow, Hasinay, and Blackfoot. She became a Bahá'í on April 11, 1974 in New Haven, Connecticut. She is currently an Educational consultant and lives with her husband and children in Newark, New Jersey.

I worked at Harlem Preparatory School in 1969. It was run by Baha'is in a former grocery store in Harlem, on 136th St. and St. Nicholas Ave., and was a private school that did not charge tuition. The one entrance requirement was that students had to be high school dropouts, and in addition to the regular New York State and city requirements, Harlem Prep students had to be admitted to college to graduate. It actually worked!

The teachers, some of whom were Bahá'ís, often discussed the equality of races and of men and woman and had a strange notion about the inevitability of harmony and peace among all peoples. The school was in a poor area of Harlem, and I continually tried to convince these Baha'is of the lunacy of their ideas in respect to the hard reality and despair that was right outside our windows. Just a few blocks away, there were junkies and drug pushers swarming all throughout the neighborhood. I could still see the vestiges of a racially biased social system that had wreaked havoc on the black community. Despite all of the blatant inequities

right before our eyes, the Baha'is discussed what I considered at the time to be insane ideas of justice and peace.

Before I left the school, one of the Bahá'í teachers invited me to a weekend in Maine to “find out about his religion”, but I indignantly refused. After two years of being with the school, I eventually took another job and then began to investigate other religions with my future husband. I visited a Yoruba priest who had five wives just to see what his lifestyle was like. I didn't want to do it, but my future husband thought it sounded sort of interesting. We listened to talks by the Empress Masaquita Fascenta, who claimed she was the literal bride of Christ. She also explained that some people, especially those of European descent, were only collections of gasses and were not a serious threat. I found that difficult to believe. We went to Yoruba dinners where all the men were to be served first and the women were to eat what was left. My future husband got his food and shared it with me, and when I received mine (which was mostly fat and gristle) we both shared that. I wore beads for our Orisha and tried to practice this religion, but there were too many rules and sacrifices to remember.

After investigating the Yoruba religion, we visited mosques and studied the Muslim Faith. What bothered me about going to a mosque was that I had to be separated from my sweetheart. I liked the idea of wearing the Muslim garb because it seemed to offer me protection when I walked the streets of Harlem after dark. However, I just did not feel that the Muslim faith was right for me. After I got married, my husband and I lived with my uncle who was a Minister. He invited us to attend his church so we started going to his church regularly. By this time, I had had twins and my husband started looking for a house that we could move into. What I began to realize after I started attending my uncle's church was that the Black church was still struggling

with the same ethnic prejudices and discrimination that had disgusted me as a child. It was 1973.

After comparing the religions I had investigated with the Baha'i principles I had learned about at Harlem Prep, I decided that if I ever found any Baha'is, I would become a member of their religion. During my four years of searching for the right religion, the Bahá'í Faith was, the most logical I had ever seen. I knew this because the white Baha'i teachers at the Harlem school had treated everyone as their equal. At the time, we were living in Connecticut and still looking for a house. How was I ever going to find the Bahá'ís I wondered?

We looked for a house in several towns, but finally found a large house in East Haven, Connecticut on a corner with a big back yard and a picket fence around it. It was located four blocks from the beach. We bought it in early fall of that year. The day before we moved in, the house across the street from us was burned to the ground because an interracial couple had moved in it. The perpetrators also put a dead rat on our back porch to scare us away because they didn't want blacks in the neighborhood. The cute wishing well in our front yard disappeared, but its pieces were returned a few days later.

We began to wonder why we had bought the house. One day while we were painting our picket fence, a black man who was driving by our house stopped the car and came over to welcome us to the town. He said we were one of six black families in the town, and the mostly Italian inhabitants were not friendly. He told us to be careful. After he left, we became a little paranoid. We began to stay inside the house as much as possible and only went to the beach by car. We also staked out places in the house away from all the windows, where we could hide with the babies in case of an attack.

One afternoon in February, as I was getting out of my car with the twins, a white woman who was walking by stopped to say “hello”. This had never happened since we moved into the area. I had embroidered the Arabic names of our 6-month-old twins’ on their little snowsuits and she asked what they meant. I warily explained the meanings to her as I walked toward our house. I had to walk slowly, however, because I was carrying two babies. She welcomed me to the neighborhood and invited me to a party she and some neighbors were having later that month.

When I saw her again, she said she taught belly-dancing lessons and asked if I was interested in taking a class. I had a very flabby belly from having the twins, and quickly agreed. There were black and white women in her classes, and she explained that belly dancing was a folk dance originated by women, not the lewd movements that were popularized. We became good friends and I enjoyed the classes.

One day she came by to give me directions to a party that she was hosting in February, and hesitantly explained that the party was to celebrate a holiday in her religion. I asked the name of her religion, and when she said, “Baha’i”, I was so shocked that I said something really loudly. I don’t remember what I said, but she stepped back, startled. I told her I had been looking for Baha’is for years. She seemed very surprised but happy.

My husband came with me to the Ayyam-i-Ha party, a celebration that the Bahá’ís have right before they do their annual fast. The lady who invited us continued to invite us to other Bahá’í events. I continued to take Belly dancing lessons from her and showed my husband what I had learned. At the first fireside I attended, I was given a horribly boring book that I did not finish reading. However the white and black people who were there acted like family. I did read

some pamphlets and a book called “Thief in the Night”, and read the Bible all the way through for the first time in my life so I could check the references in the book. The Bahá’ís were all fasting during the month of March (March 2nd to March 21st), which sounded like a miserable way to spend a month.

I told my husband that I wanted to be in the same religion as my belly-dancing teacher was and he excitedly agreed that it was a good idea. He volunteered to buy me the dance “uniform” I wanted. I called her when I knew they had finished fasting and on April 11th, 1974, in the afternoon. I told her I wanted to become a Baha’i! We sat at the kitchen table while the sun streamed through the windows and she asked me if I understood the questions on the card. I was a bit surprised that there was a card to sign! Well, this was not as bad as joining the Presbyterian Church where I was immediately asked to give a donation. I signed without much of a fuss.

I was the ninth Baha’i in East Haven. My belly-dancing teacher and her husband lived a half a block up the road on a corner that forced them to pass our house every time they went to the main road. Within a week, I was on the Local Spiritual Assembly of the City of East Haven. ❀

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

‘Abdu’l-Bahá: The appointed Successor of Baha’u’llah and Center of His Covenant.

Akká: The Prison City in Palestine where Bahá’u’lláh was exiled. He arrived there on August 31, 1868.

Alláh-u-Abhá: Used as a greeting among Bahá’ís. Translated as God is Most Glorious.

Ancient of Days: A title of God, pertaining in the Bible to the Book of Daniel.

Aqdas: The greatest of Bahá’u’lláh’s works containing His laws and ordinances.

Association of Bahá’í Studies: A Bahá’í association that promotes the study of the Bahai writings.

Báb, The: The forerunner to Baha’u’llah in the same way that John the Baptist was the forerunner to Jesus Christ. Proclaimed his ministry in 1844 and was martyred in 1950.

Bahá’u’lláh: The Founder of the Bahá’í Faith (1817-1892)

Bahá’í World Centre: The spiritual and administrative center of the Bahá’í Faith in the Haifa-Acre area of Israel.

Blessed Beauty: One of the titles used by Baháís to refer to Baha’u’llah.

Entry By Troops: A term used to describe the future growth of Bahá’í members throughout the world.

Farsi: The Persian language.

Fireside: An informational meeting held in one's home for the purpose of sharing the Bahá'í teachings.

Knight of Bahá'u'lláh: Title initially given by Shoghi Effendi to those Bahá'ís who arose to spread the Bahá'í Teachings to specified areas throughout the world during the period of 1953 to 1963

Local Spiritual Assembly: The local administrative body of the Bahá'í Faith.

Mount Carmel: The mountain spoken of by Isaiah as the "mountain of the Lord."

National Spiritual Assembly: The National administrative body of the Bahá'í Faith.

Naw Ruz: An annual new year celebration observed by the Bahá'í on the 21st of March.

New Jerusalem: A term used to signify the emergence of a new truth or holy revelation in the world.

Nineteen Day Feast: The principal gathering in each local Bahá'í community every Bahá'í month.

Pioneer: A Bahá'í who volunteers to spread the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith in another country.

Progressive Revelation: A continuous and successive outpouring of divine messages from God's Chosen One's.

Revelation: The unveiling by God to men of something which hitherto He had hidden from them.

Ridván: Arabic for paradise. Twelve day festival(from April 21st to May 2nd) commemorating Bahá'u'lláh's declaration of his mission in 1863

Seal of the Prophets: A title of Muhammad, referring to the approaching of the Prophetic Cycle.

THE CHOSEN PATH

Seals and Crofts: A popular Bahá'í duo in the 1970's who helped spread the Bahá'í Teachings through their recorded music and live concerts.

Shí'ih: A Muhammadan sect distinguished by its spiritual doctrine of the Imámate.

Shoghi Effendi: Grandson of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith.

Sunní: The larger of the more powerful of the two great Islamic sects.

Tihrán: The birthplace of Bahá'u'lláh(November 12, 1817) and the capital of Irán.

Universal House of Justice: The supreme administrative body of the Bahá'í Faith located in Haifa, Israel.

SELECTED WORKS

by the Authoritative Centers of the Faith

Abdu'l-Bahá (son of Prophet-Founder Bahá'u'llah) 1844 - 1921

Paris Talks. London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1961

Promulgation of Universal Peace. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1982

Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre 1982

Some Answered Questions. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1985

The Báb (Forerunner of Prophet-Founder Bahá'u'llah) 1819 - 1850

Selections from the Writings of the Báb. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1982

Bahá'u'llah (Prophet-Founder of the Bahá'í Faith) 1817 – 1892

The Four Valleys and the Seven Valleys. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust

Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'llah. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983

Hidden Words. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1990

Kitáb-I-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book. Haifa: Bahá'í World Centre, 1992

Kitáb-I-Iqán: The Book of Certitude. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983

Tablets of Bahá'u'llah. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust 1988

Shoghi Effendi (Great Grandson of Bahá'u'llah) 1898 - 1957

Advent of Divine Justice. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1984

Citadel of Faith. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1965

God Passes By. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979

Promised Day Is Come. Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980

Universal House of Justice

Individual Rights and Freedoms in the World Order of Bahá'u'lláh. Wilmette, IL: BPT, 1989

The Promise of World Peace. Wilmette, IL: BPT, 1985

Commentaries about the Bahá'í Faith (Available at www.Bahaibookstore.com)

All Things Made New

God Loves Laughter

Prescription For Living

Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh

The Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í Faith: Emerging Global Religion

The Dawnbreakers

The Imperishable Dominion

Thief In the Night

Wine of Astonishment