

The following story is from the book
The Central Figures

Bahá'u'lláh

Volume Three



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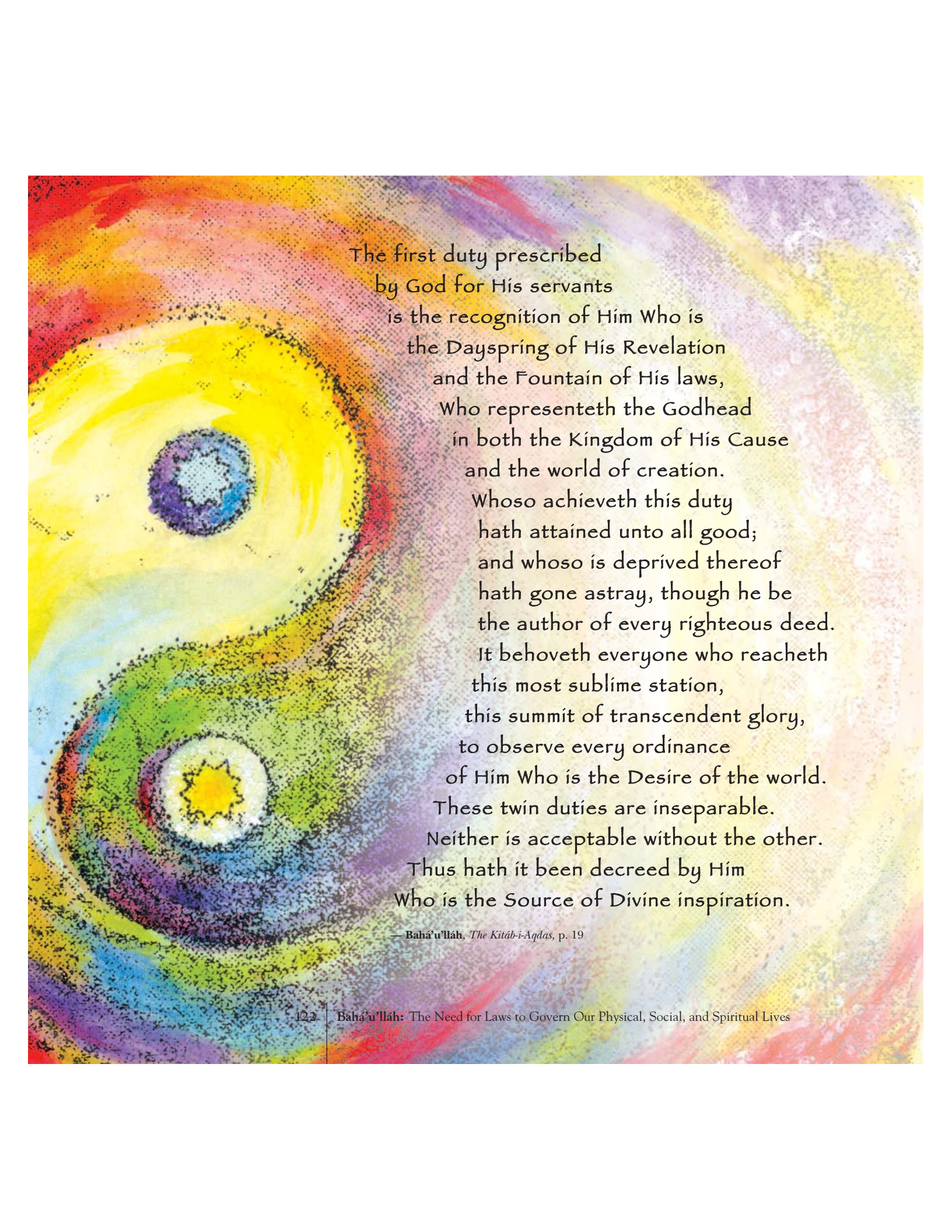
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The first duty prescribed
by God for His servants
is the recognition of Him Who is
the Dayspring of His Revelation
and the Fountain of His laws,
Who representeth the Godhead
in both the Kingdom of His Cause
and the world of creation.
Whoso achieveth this duty
hath attained unto all good;
and whoso is deprived thereof
hath gone astray, though he be
the author of every righteous deed.
It behoveth everyone who reacheth
this most sublime station,
this summit of transcendent glory,
to observe every ordinance
of Him Who is the Desire of the world.
These twin duties are inseparable.
Neither is acceptable without the other.
Thus hath it been decreed by Him
Who is the Source of Divine inspiration.

— Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 19

A Flame of Fire

*Written by Kim Douglas
Illustrated by Carla Trimble*

Rúhu'lláh Richards wished that his parents had never given him such a difficult name, one that during middle school was the source of teasing and ridicule by some of his classmates. "Ru-ru-la-la. Ru-ru-la-la," Brad Pickford, Lincoln Manning, and Josh Jordan sometimes chanted on the school bus. Brad continued the torment in the school hallways, and, in front of the prettiest girls, quipped, "Where did you get that weird-o name?" Rúhu'lláh ignored the insult but, deep down, felt embarrassed.

"Why did you give me such a name? No one can pronounce it," Rúhu'lláh complained.

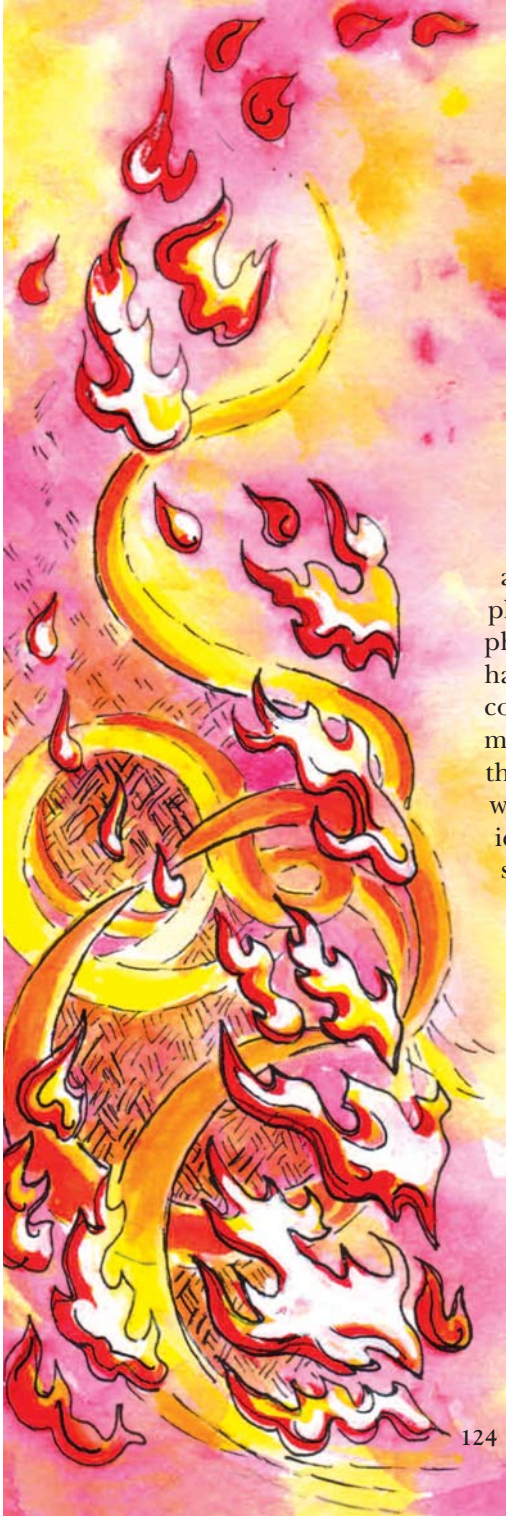
"I know this is hard for you," Mr. Richards responded, "but I truly believe you will someday feel both pride and humility in being named after this great Bahá'í martyr."

"How can anyone feel pride and humility at the same time?" Rúhu'lláh asked his father.

"That seems impossible. They're opposites."

"Son," Mr. Richards continued with a long deep sigh, "you have always loved the stories of Rúhu'lláh. You have admired his bravery, his wit, his love for the Faith, and his martyrdom. There is so much about him you can feel pride about, don't you think?"





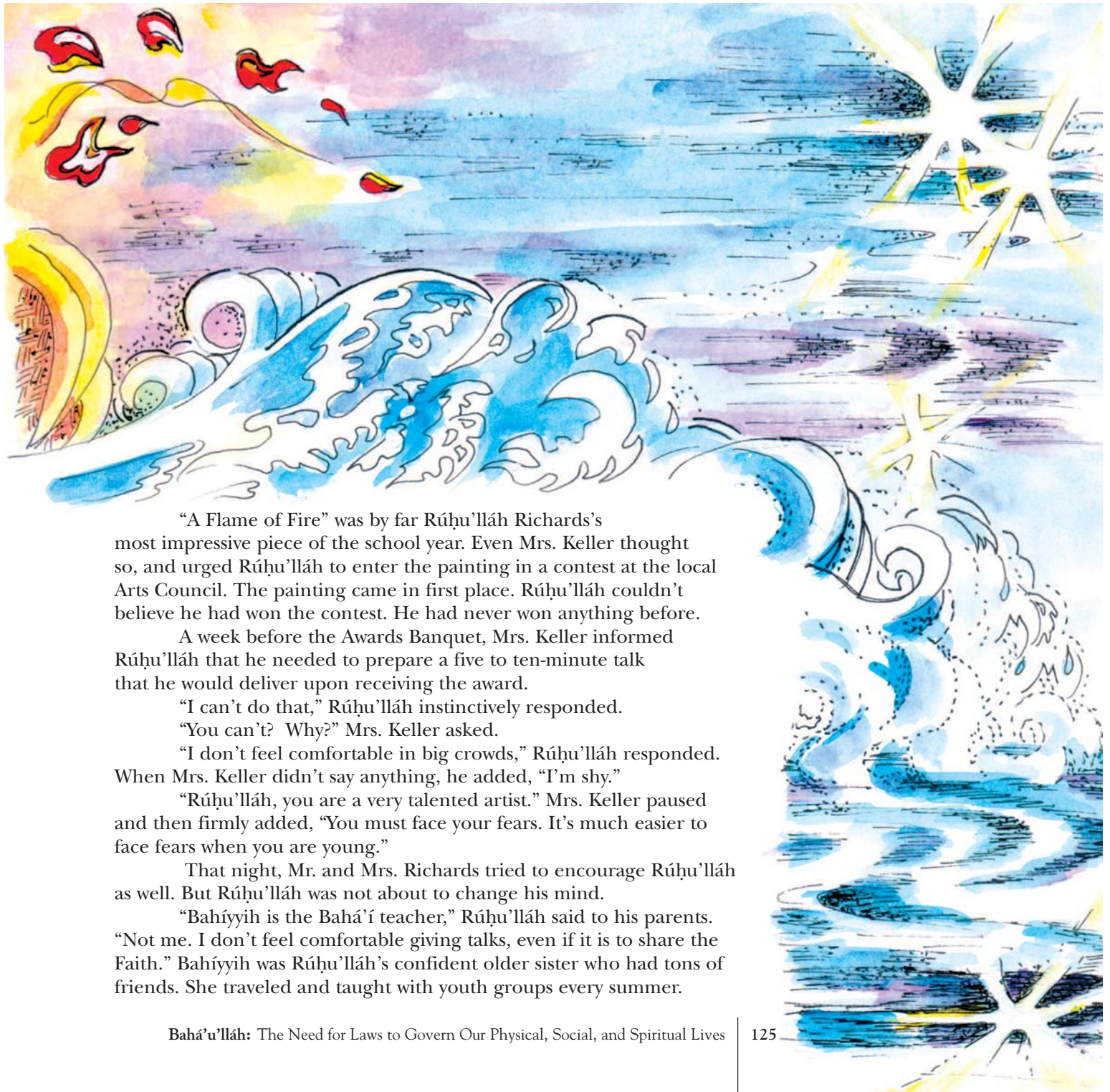
“Yes, I do feel pride. I like reading about Rúḥu’lláh, but did I have to be named after him? I can feel pride without sharing the name. Besides, I don’t even come close to being a hero or martyr. I can’t possibly live up to this name.”

“See, you already feel some humility by saying you can’t live up to such heroic status. Humility is good.” Rúḥu’lláh’s father looked his son in the eye and added, “You are facing a serious challenge, one that is very uncomfortable for you. I imagine if you ponder Rúḥu’lláh’s short life that you might discover a way to cope.” Mr. Richards placed his hands over his sons. “Why don’t we say a prayer for guidance?”

Rúḥu’lláh nodded. His father was a kind man and prayer couldn’t hurt, though Rúḥu’lláh wasn’t so sure it was going to stop the teasing. Mr. Richards began chanting “The Tablet of Aḥmad.” When he got to the part, “Be thou as a flame of fire to my enemies and a river of life eternal to my loved ones,” Rúḥu’lláh was struck by the phrase “flame of fire.” For the rest of the day he considered how that phrase might help him face the challenge of being teased. The boys who had been teasing him were not enemies of Bahá’u’lláh. But Rúḥu’lláh couldn’t help but believe that, if he developed the same detachment as many of the early believers who suffered at the hands of the enemies of the Faith, he might be able to better deal with this annoyance. Instead of wanting to pretend he had another name, instead of hiding his Bahá’í identity, instead of letting his shyness overcome him, he could pray for some of the courage of the early heroes and heroines who had faced a whole lot worse.

The next week, Rúḥu’lláh brought a scanned copy of a photograph of Rúḥu’lláh with chains around his neck to his studio art class. Mrs. Keller, his art teacher, had assigned the class the task of retrieving a photo of a heroic person to paint. When Rúḥu’lláh had followed his Dad’s advice and reread some of the stories of Rúḥu’lláh, he felt awestruck. At the age of 12, Rúḥu’lláh was taken hostage and forced by his captors to watch as they martyred Varqá, his father, by thrusting a dagger into his belly and cutting him into pieces. Then these ruthless murderers approached Rúḥu’lláh and asked him to recant his faith. Rúḥu’lláh refused and was strangled with a rope.

After three weeks of class time and some additional time after school, Rúḥu’lláh completed the painting. He titled it “A Flame of Fire” because Rúḥu’lláh, Varqá’s son, soared on, teaching the Faith despite the brutality of the enemies to extinguish such efforts.



“A Flame of Fire” was by far Rúḥu'lláh Richards’s most impressive piece of the school year. Even Mrs. Keller thought so, and urged Rúḥu'lláh to enter the painting in a contest at the local Arts Council. The painting came in first place. Rúḥu'lláh couldn’t believe he had won the contest. He had never won anything before.

A week before the Awards Banquet, Mrs. Keller informed Rúḥu'lláh that he needed to prepare a five to ten-minute talk that he would deliver upon receiving the award.

“I can’t do that,” Rúḥu'lláh instinctively responded.

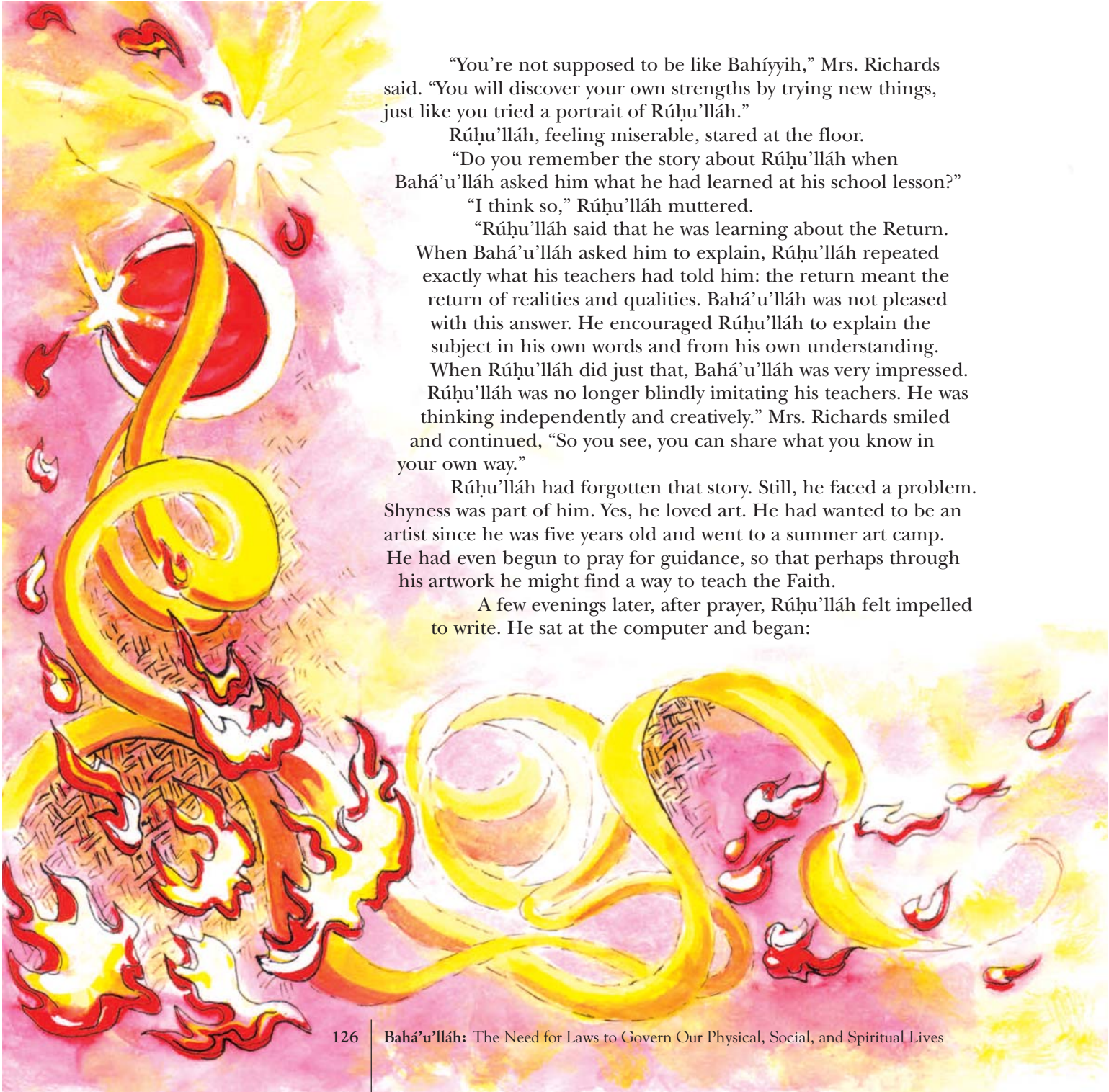
“You can’t? Why?” Mrs. Keller asked.

“I don’t feel comfortable in big crowds,” Rúḥu'lláh responded. When Mrs. Keller didn’t say anything, he added, “I’m shy.”

“Rúḥu'lláh, you are a very talented artist.” Mrs. Keller paused and then firmly added, “You must face your fears. It’s much easier to face fears when you are young.”

That night, Mr. and Mrs. Richards tried to encourage Rúḥu'lláh as well. But Rúḥu'lláh was not about to change his mind.

“Bahíyyih is the Bahá’í teacher,” Rúḥu'lláh said to his parents. “Not me. I don’t feel comfortable giving talks, even if it is to share the Faith.” Bahíyyih was Rúḥu'lláh’s confident older sister who had tons of friends. She traveled and taught with youth groups every summer.



“You’re not supposed to be like Bahíyyih,” Mrs. Richards said. “You will discover your own strengths by trying new things, just like you tried a portrait of Rúḥu’lláh.”

Rúḥu’lláh, feeling miserable, stared at the floor.

“Do you remember the story about Rúḥu’lláh when Bahá’u’lláh asked him what he had learned at his school lesson?”

“I think so,” Rúḥu’lláh muttered.

“Rúḥu’lláh said that he was learning about the Return. When Bahá’u’lláh asked him to explain, Rúḥu’lláh repeated exactly what his teachers had told him: the return meant the return of realities and qualities. Bahá’u’lláh was not pleased with this answer. He encouraged Rúḥu’lláh to explain the subject in his own words and from his own understanding. When Rúḥu’lláh did just that, Bahá’u’lláh was very impressed. Rúḥu’lláh was no longer blindly imitating his teachers. He was thinking independently and creatively.” Mrs. Richards smiled and continued, “So you see, you can share what you know in your own way.”

Rúḥu’lláh had forgotten that story. Still, he faced a problem. Shyness was part of him. Yes, he loved art. He had wanted to be an artist since he was five years old and went to a summer art camp. He had even begun to pray for guidance, so that perhaps through his artwork he might find a way to teach the Faith.

A few evenings later, after prayer, Rúḥu’lláh felt impelled to write. He sat at the computer and began:



Rúḥu'lláh



My name, not your typical American name, appears very strange and impossible to pronounce. Through the years at school, teachers have sincerely tried, during those first days of class, to pronounce my name. Some even asked if I had a nickname. No nickname. Just Rúḥu'lláh. Pronounced Roo-hole-lah. Most teachers caught on, but sometimes kids deliberately mispronounce my name. This kind of teasing is very painful, and unfortunately, I have wished at times that my parents had never named me Rúḥu'lláh.

I was named after a Bahá'í hero and martyr. Rúḥu'lláh, in his short life of only 12 years, loved the new religion his father had chosen. He learned as much as he could about the religion and taught these new teachings to everyone with whom he came in contact, even priests and other divines who were worried about the growth of this new religion that they considered wrong. His father, Varqá, was executed in front of him in the most gruesome way because he was a Bahá'í. The murderers hoped that witnessing such a brutal act would terrify the boy into recanting his faith. But Rúḥu'lláh refused. He gave his life for the Bahá'í Cause.

The Bahá'í Faith, founded by Bahá'u'lláh, renews the spiritual teachings of the major world religions and brings to mankind new social teachings, like the elimination of prejudice, the equality of men and women, and the independent investigation of truth. I love being a Bahá'í because of the teachings on unity.

When I complained to my parents about some recent teasing, they suggested that I read again about the short life of Rúḥu'lláh to gain some courage and confidence. I came across a photograph and decided I would paint Rúḥu'lláh. During the many hours I worked on this portrait, I thought about his bravery. He endured more than insults. I intend to keep his stories closer to my heart to help me deal with whatever teasing might come my way.



That Friday evening at the Awards Banquet, Rúḥu'lláh stood at the podium and read to the audience the very words he had typed out a few nights earlier. While many Bahá'ís, including his sister, had the talent of spontaneously sharing the Teachings, Rúḥu'lláh needed words on the page, in black and white, to ease his nerves and guide his thoughts.

Now that Rúḥu'lláh is 40 years old, he remembers that day and the lessons he learned. He has known since he was very young that Bahá'u'lláh exhorts His followers in the Most Holy Book, the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, to teach and propagate the Faith. Back then, he had felt inadequate, too shy, not good enough with words. Prayer, however, released him from his own fears. Over the years, Rúḥu'lláh has shown his art throughout the United States and Canada. He feels grateful for the multitude of ways to teach the Faith.

He teaches through his art. ★

