

The following story is from the book
The Central Figures

Bahá'u'lláh

Volume Three



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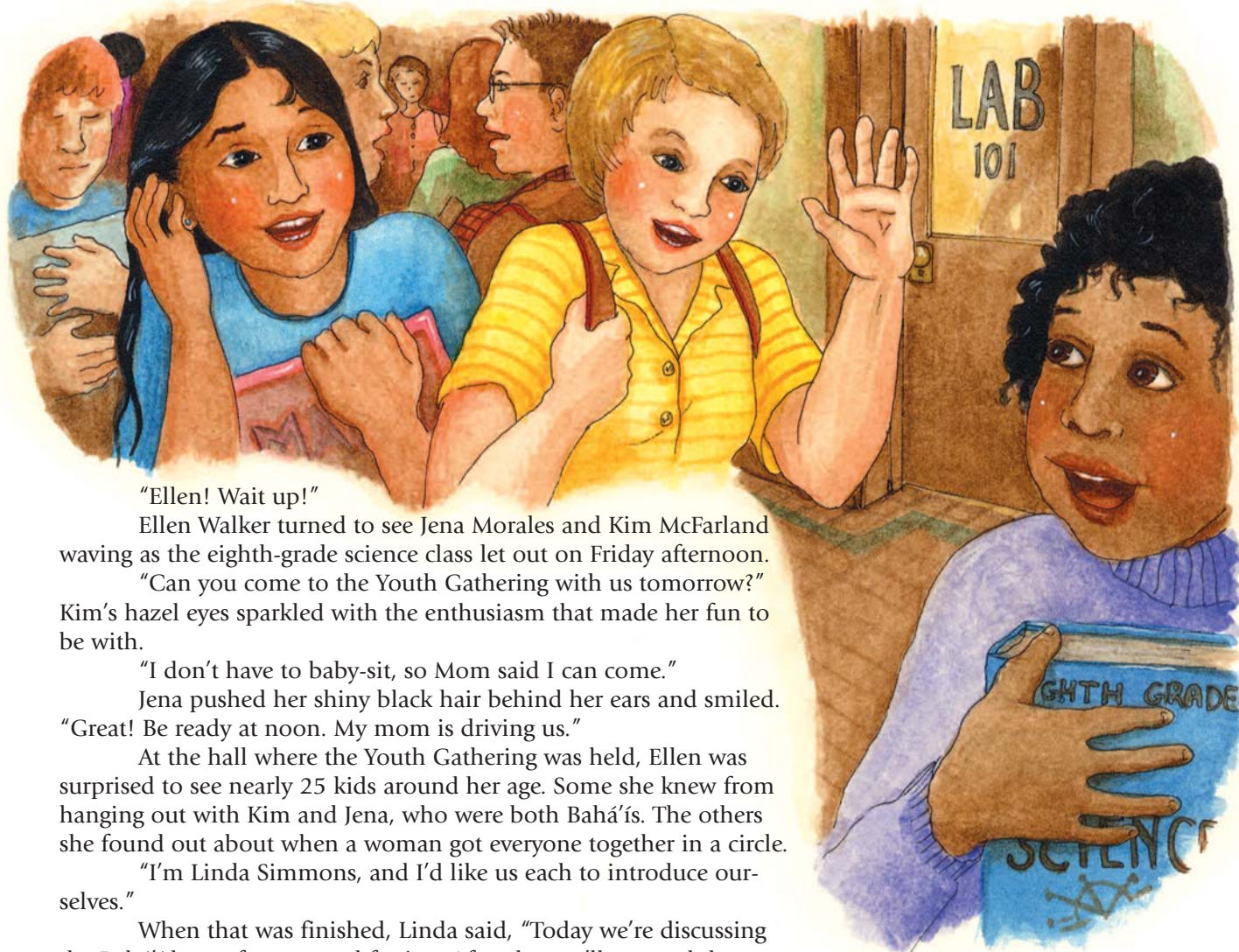

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Say: From My laws the sweet-smelling savour of My garment can be smelled, and by their aid the standards of Victory will be planted upon the highest peaks. The Tongue of My power hath, from the heaven of My omnipotent glory, addressed to My creation these words: “Observe My commandments, for the love of My beauty.” Happy is the lover that hath inhaled the divine fragrance of his Best-Beloved from these words, laden with the perfume of a grace which no tongue can describe. By My life! He who hath drunk the choice wine of fairness from the hands of My bountiful favour will circle around My commandments that shine above the Dayspring of My creation.

— Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, pp. 20–21

Now I Understand



"Ellen! Wait up!"

Ellen Walker turned to see Jena Morales and Kim McFarland waving as the eighth-grade science class let out on Friday afternoon.

"Can you come to the Youth Gathering with us tomorrow?"

Kim's hazel eyes sparkled with the enthusiasm that made her fun to be with.

"I don't have to baby-sit, so Mom said I can come."

Jena pushed her shiny black hair behind her ears and smiled.

"Great! Be ready at noon. My mom is driving us."

At the hall where the Youth Gathering was held, Ellen was surprised to see nearly 25 kids around her age. Some she knew from hanging out with Kim and Jena, who were both Bahá'ís. The others she found out about when a woman got everyone together in a circle.

"I'm Linda Simmons, and I'd like us each to introduce ourselves."

When that was finished, Linda said, "Today we're discussing the Bahá'í laws of prayer and fasting. After that we'll eat, and the Youth Workshop will show us their latest project." Her pleasant expression and smile made Ellen feel comfortable. Linda continued, "We want everyone to take part in the discussion."

Written by Adrienne Ellis Reeves

Illustrated by Winifred Barnum-Newman



Ellen had been to a couple of Bahá'í events and knew that the Bahá'í Faith was a religion like Christianity. The Bahá'ís believed in Bahá'u'lláh like Christians believed in Christ. Jena and Kim went to a regular meeting called the Nineteen Day Feast, just like Ellen and her family went to church service on Sunday. What interested her most about the Bahá'í Faith was that it seemed to attract all kinds of people. They all seemed to get along no matter if they were white Americans like Kim, or black American like herself, or Latino like Jose Torres, or like Jena, whose mother was Persian and whose father was Brazilian. She'd even seen some Asian people at a meeting.

When Jena had mentioned that today's discussion was about laws, Ellen had been puzzled. "What kind of laws are you talking about?"

"Come with us and see," Jena had said.

Linda was speaking again. "Who can tell us what the Bahá'í Teachings are about prayer?"

"Prayer is how we talk to God," Jena said, "and it brings us nearer to Him."

A boy opposite Ellen said, "I read that prayer is like a ladder between heaven and earth by which we can ascend to paradise."

"What does that mean to you?" Linda asked.

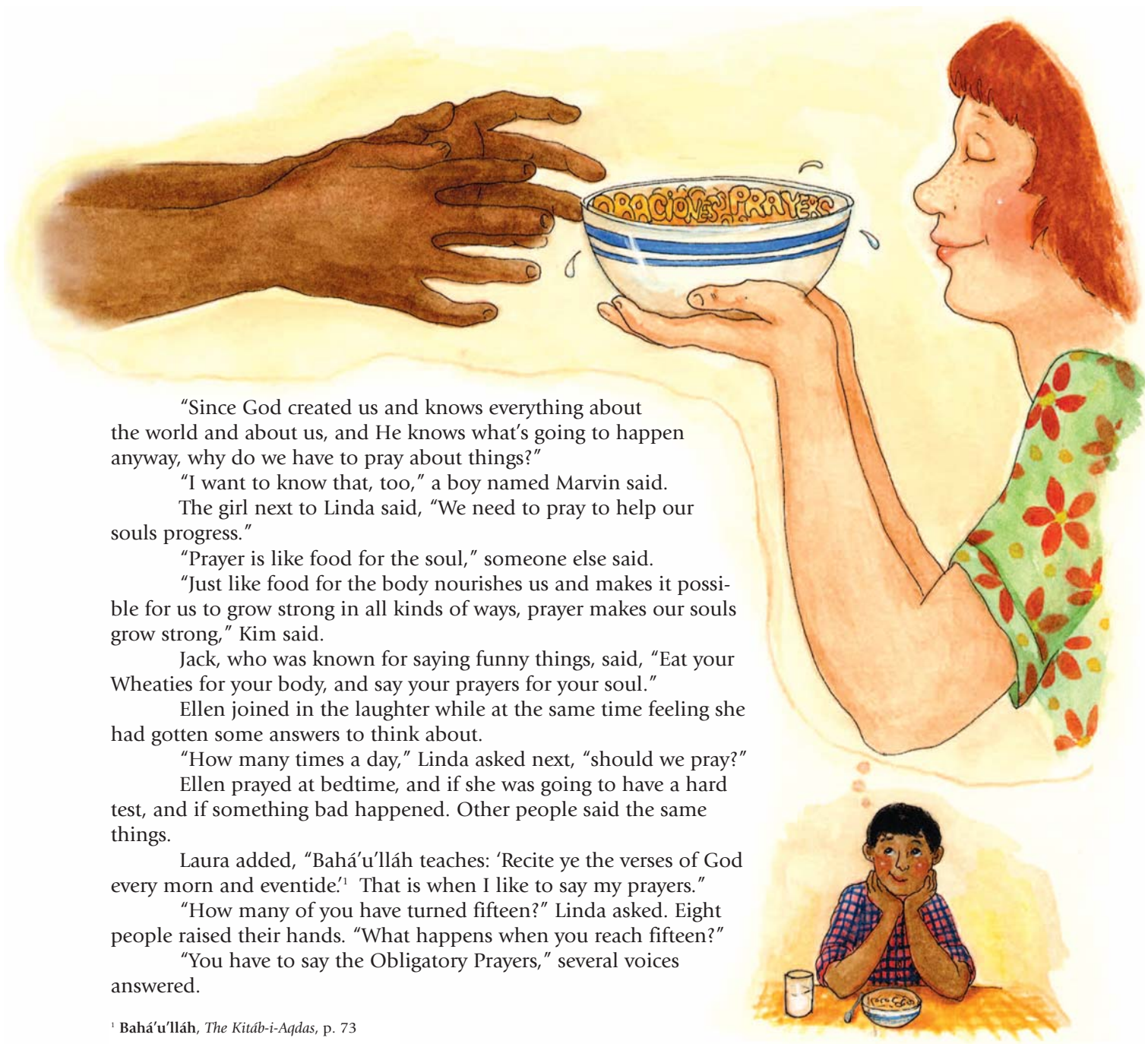
After a moment's silence a girl said, "You get on a ladder and climb the steps to get higher and reach something or somewhere above you."

Ellen was sitting there thinking of the spiritual from her church, a song called, "We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder." The words gave her an idea to contribute to the discussion, and she raised her hand to share about the song. "Every rung goes higher and higher, and if each rung is our prayers, then they keep going until they bring us near to God." After she spoke, she felt shy with everyone looking at her, but Linda said, "That's excellent, Ellen."

"What happens when you love people?" Linda asked. "You want to be close to them, don't you, to be in their presence and to converse with them? So because we love God, we want to be close to Him, to be in His presence. Prayer helps us to do that."

Ellen could see that, but there was a question she'd been thinking about lately. Maybe she could bring it up here with people her own age and see what they thought.

She raised her hand again. "Yes, Ellen," Linda said.



“Since God created us and knows everything about the world and about us, and He knows what’s going to happen anyway, why do we have to pray about things?”

“I want to know that, too,” a boy named Marvin said.

The girl next to Linda said, “We need to pray to help our souls progress.”

“Prayer is like food for the soul,” someone else said.

“Just like food for the body nourishes us and makes it possible for us to grow strong in all kinds of ways, prayer makes our souls grow strong,” Kim said.

Jack, who was known for saying funny things, said, “Eat your Wheaties for your body, and say your prayers for your soul.”

Ellen joined in the laughter while at the same time feeling she had gotten some answers to think about.

“How many times a day,” Linda asked next, “should we pray?”

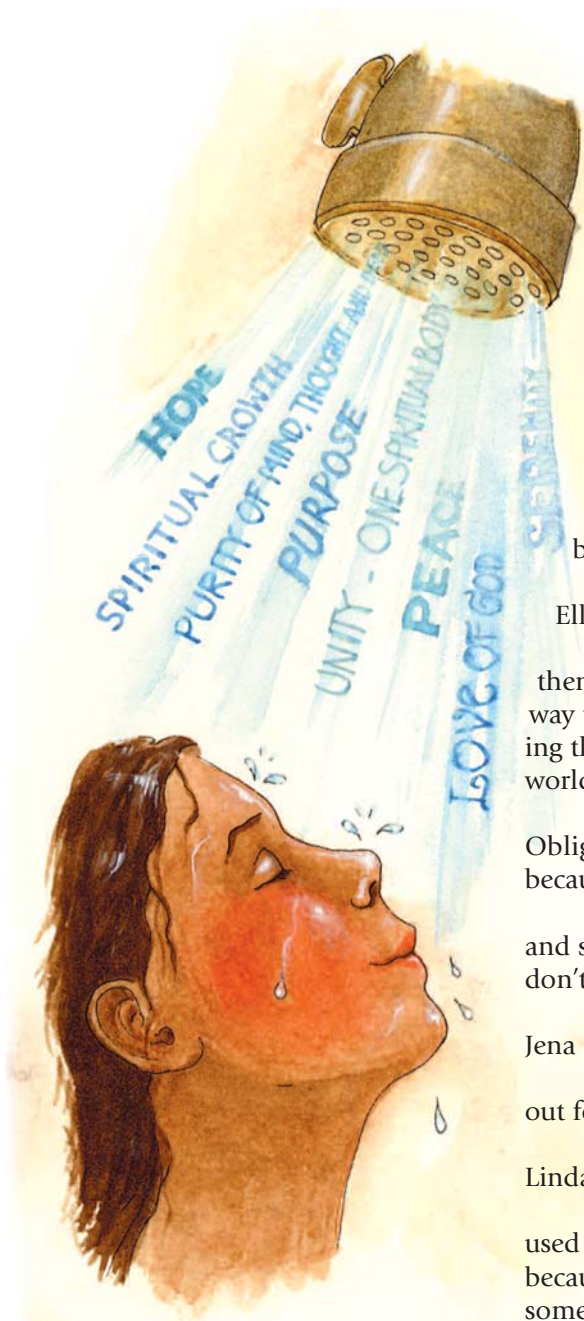
Ellen prayed at bedtime, and if she was going to have a hard test, and if something bad happened. Other people said the same things.

Laura added, “Bahá’u’lláh teaches: ‘Recite ye the verses of God every morn and eventide.’¹ That is when I like to say my prayers.”

“How many of you have turned fifteen?” Linda asked. Eight people raised their hands. “What happens when you reach fifteen?”

“You have to say the Obligatory Prayers,” several voices answered.

¹ Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, p. 73



Linda said, "One of the Bahá'í laws is about the Obligatory Prayers and another is about fasting. These are very important laws, and we obey them out of our love for Bahá'u'lláh. Obligatory is a word that means we're obliged to say them; we have to say them. There are three different ones, and we can choose which one to say. The long one can be said anytime during the day. A medium-length one is said three times a day. And the shortest one is said once a day between noon and sunset. They have a special power, and when we say them, they have a special effect on us. Can anyone say what effect these prayers have on them?"

Jeff who was sixteen, said, "I'm using the short one. It reminds me every day of my purpose in life, because it says, 'Thou hast created me to know Thee and to worship Thee.' "

Mary said, "I think of the Obligatory Prayers sort of like a bath that helps us to keep clean every day and to be pure."

"But why are these prayers more powerful than others?"

Ellen asked.

"One reason," Linda answered, "is because Bahá'u'lláh made them a part of His laws, and that alone gives them power. Another way to look at it is that all over the world, Bahá'ís everywhere are saying these special prayers every day. They bring together the whole world in prayers that lead us to be unified as one spiritual family."

"I turned fifteen last year," Betty said. "I say the long Obligatory Prayer. At first, I thought it'd be hard, but now I like it, because the more I say it, the more meaning I get from it."

"Fasting is the other important law that goes along with prayer and starts when you're fifteen," Linda explained. "Fasting means we don't eat or drink from sunrise to sunset. For how long, Jena?"

"For 19 days from March second through March twentieth," Jena said.

Nineteen days? Ellen was sure she couldn't go that long without food.

"Would someone like to tell us how they feel about fasting?" Linda asked.

Simon spoke up. "It was very hard when I began, because I was used to snacking all day. I didn't make it through the first three days, because by two o'clock, I was so hungry and thirsty I had to have something." He stopped and looked down at the floor.

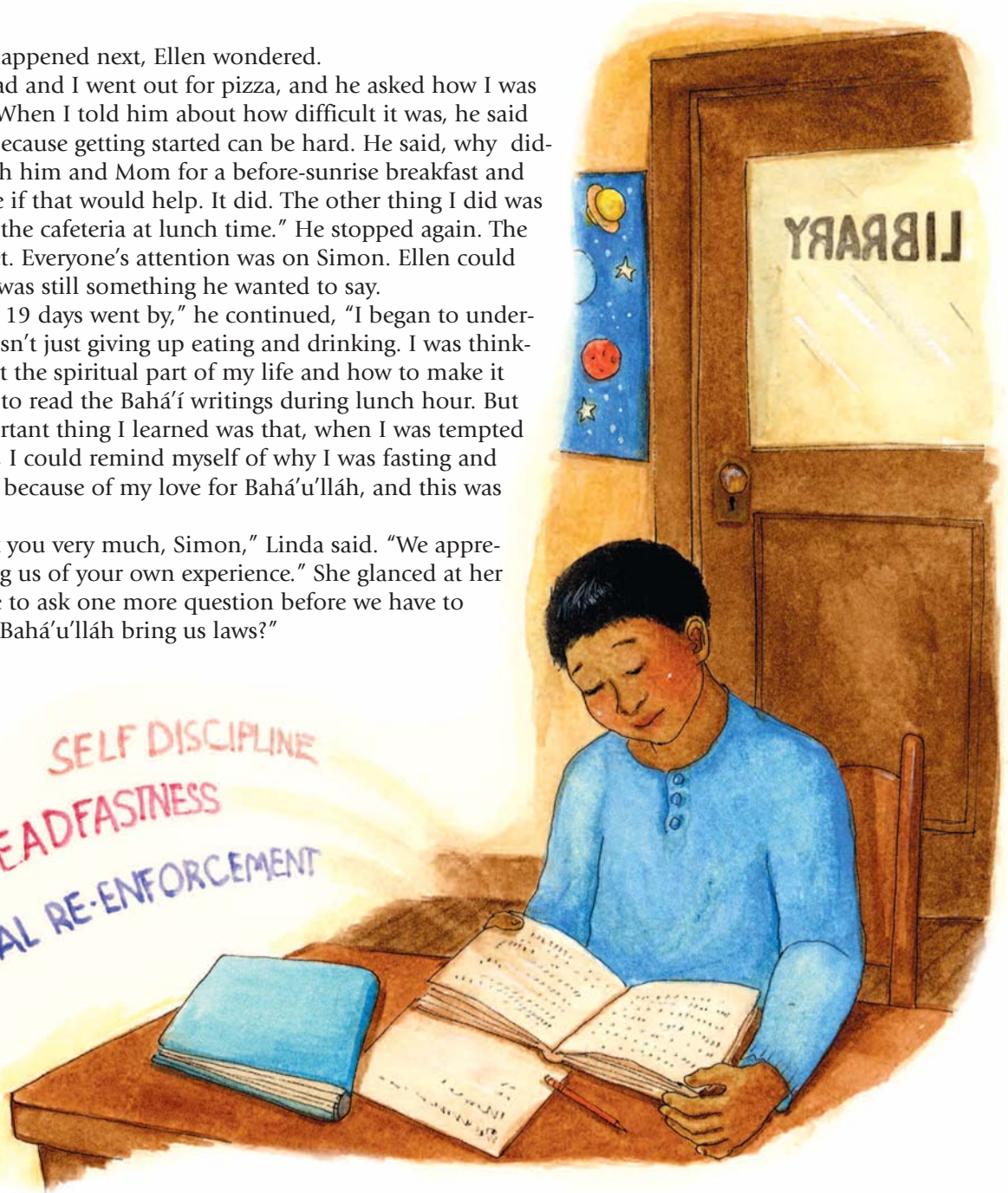
What happened next, Ellen wondered.

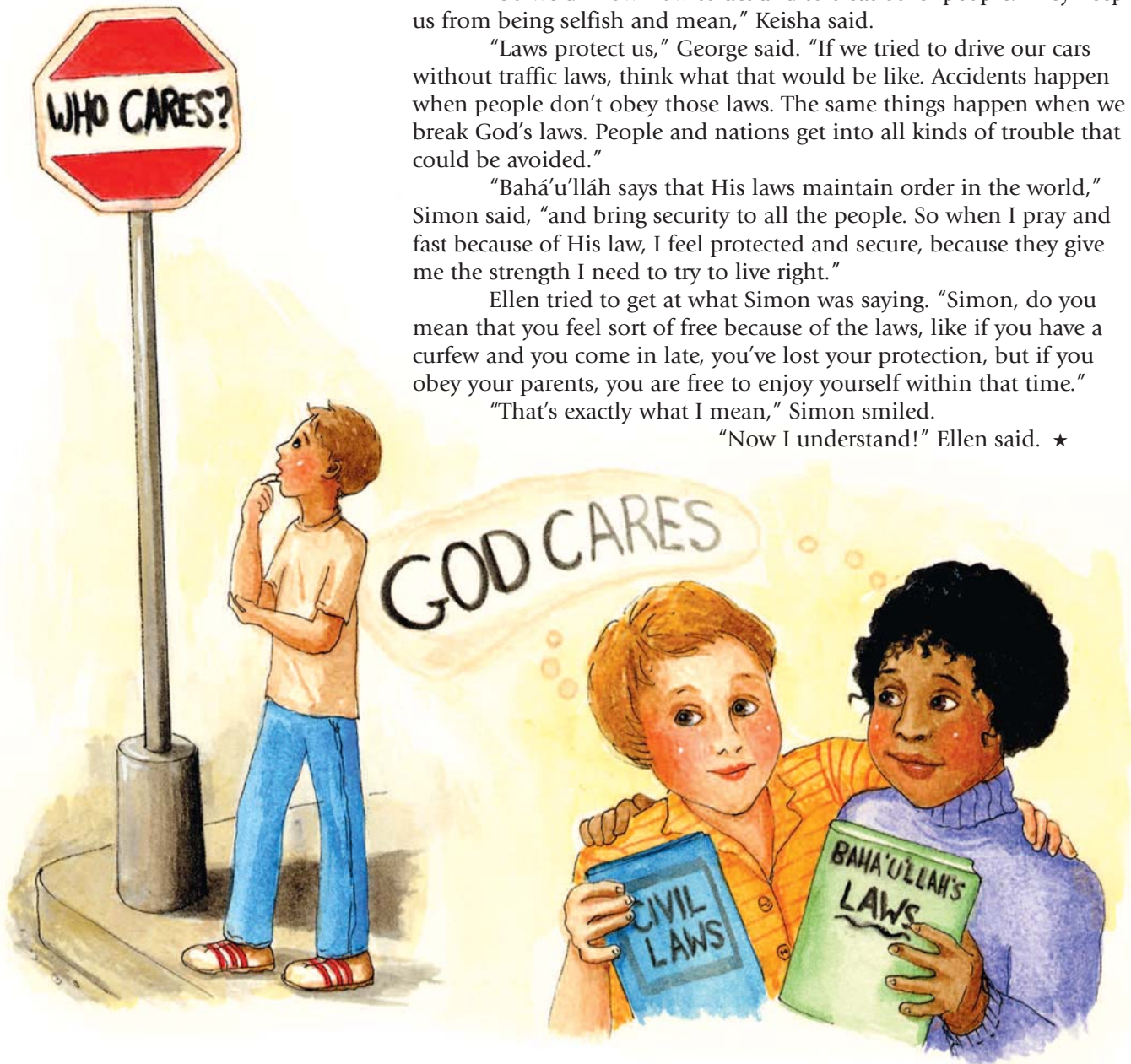
"My Dad and I went out for pizza, and he asked how I was getting along. When I told him about how difficult it was, he said not to worry, because getting started can be hard. He said, why didn't I get up with him and Mom for a before-sunrise breakfast and prayers and see if that would help. It did. The other thing I did was not to go near the cafeteria at lunch time." He stopped again. The room was quiet. Everyone's attention was on Simon. Ellen could feel that there was still something he wanted to say.

"As the 19 days went by," he continued, "I began to understand that I wasn't just giving up eating and drinking. I was thinking more about the spiritual part of my life and how to make it better. I began to read the Bahá'í writings during lunch hour. But the most important thing I learned was that, when I was tempted to eat or drink, I could remind myself of why I was fasting and praying. It was because of my love for Bahá'u'lláh, and this was His law."

"Thank you very much, Simon," Linda said. "We appreciate you telling us of your own experience." She glanced at her watch. "I'd like to ask one more question before we have to stop. Why did Bahá'u'lláh bring us laws?"

SELF DISCIPLINE
STEADFASTNESS
SPIRITUAL RE-ENFORCEMENT





"So we'd know how to act and to treat other people. They keep us from being selfish and mean," Keisha said.

"Laws protect us," George said. "If we tried to drive our cars without traffic laws, think what that would be like. Accidents happen when people don't obey those laws. The same things happen when we break God's laws. People and nations get into all kinds of trouble that could be avoided."

"Bahá'u'lláh says that His laws maintain order in the world," Simon said, "and bring security to all the people. So when I pray and fast because of His law, I feel protected and secure, because they give me the strength I need to try to live right."

Ellen tried to get at what Simon was saying. "Simon, do you mean that you feel sort of free because of the laws, like if you have a curfew and you come in late, you've lost your protection, but if you obey your parents, you are free to enjoy yourself within that time."

"That's exactly what I mean," Simon smiled.

"Now I understand!" Ellen said. ★