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The Central Figures

Bahá'u'lláh

Volume Three



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Recite ye the verses of God every morn and eventide. Whoso faileth to recite them hath not been faithful to the Covenant of God and His Testament, and whoso turneth away from these holy verses in this Day is of those who throughout eternity have turned away from God. Fear ye God, O My servants, one and all. Pride not yourselves on much reading of the verses or on a multitude of pious acts by night and day; for were a man to read a single verse with joy and radiance it would be better for him than to read with lassitude all the Holy Books of God, the Help in Peril, the Self-Subsisting. Read ye the sacred verses in such measure that ye be not overcome by langour and despondency. Lay not upon your souls that which will weary them and weigh them down, but rather what will lighten and uplift them, so that they may soar on the wings of the Divine verses towards the Dawning-place of His manifest signs; this will draw you nearer to God, did ye but comprehend.

— Bahá'u'lláh, *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas*, pp. 73–74



OUT OF THE BOX

Nate and I go fishing every Saturday. Nate likes going down to the river as much as I do. Down on the riverbank, Nate's the only white person around and, at first, I found his ease among black people surprising. White folks often seem to live in an invisible box that keeps them away from blacks.

I knew Nate was different the first time we met.

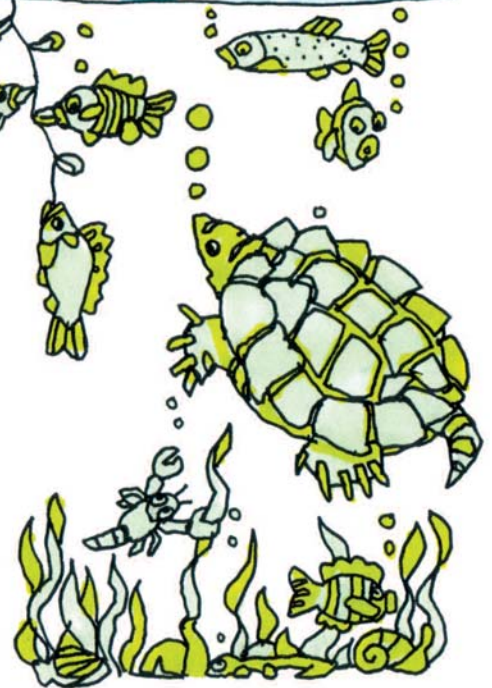
One day, I was complaining at school about some bad luck I had: "I had a stringer full of catfish, and a snapping turtle ate them, leaving nothing but the heads!"

"What's a stringer?" LaKeesha asked, looking bewildered.

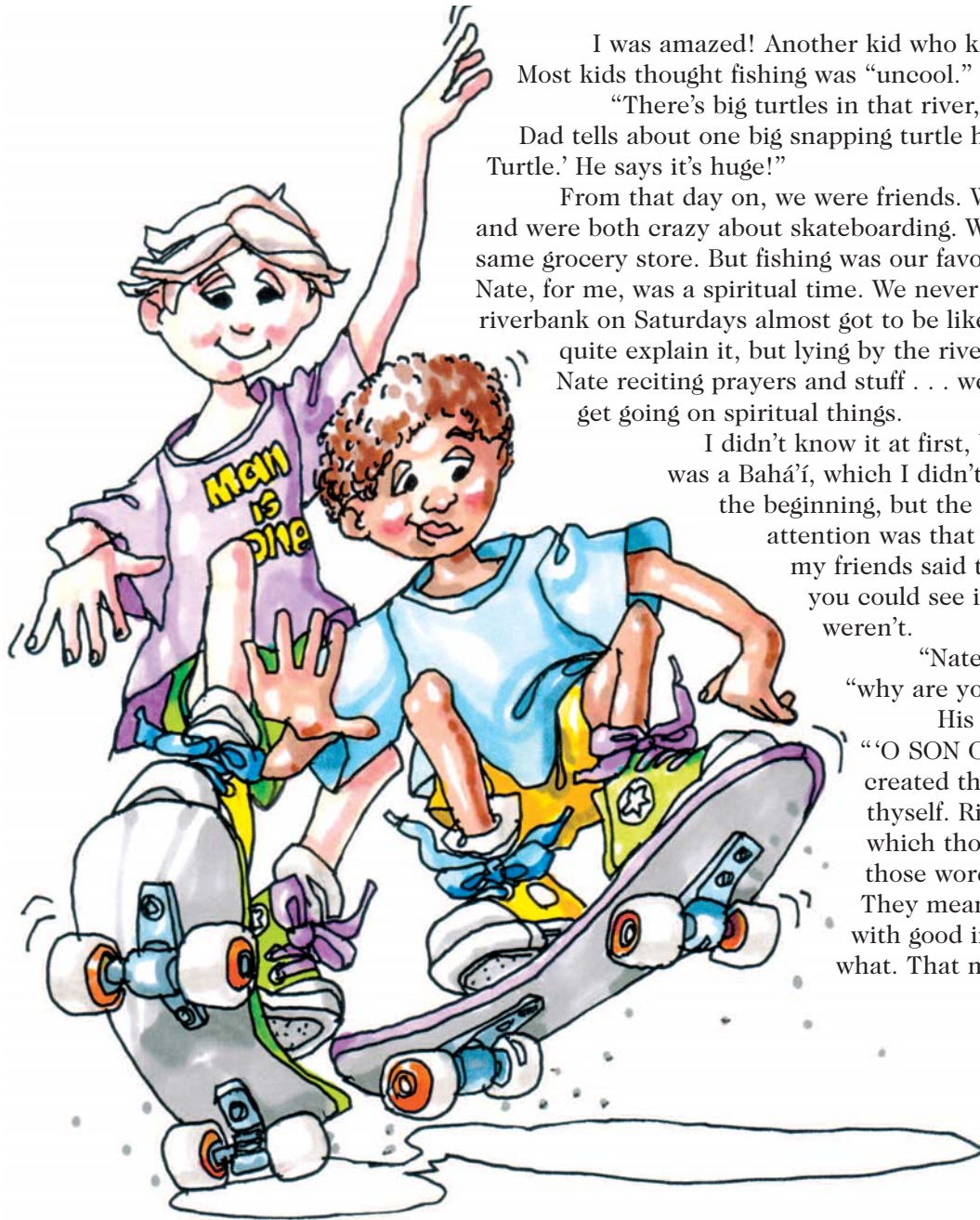
"How can a turtle eat all your fish without you seeing him?" Tommy smirked.

They didn't know anything about fishing. Worse, they didn't care.

"That happened to me once, too." The words came from a white kid I'd never noticed before. It was Nate. "A stringer is a cord with special hooks on it. You attach the fish you catch to it and then put them back in the water, and they can't swim away. It keeps the fish alive until you want them. You can't see the fish in cloudy water and a turtle can eat them. It happens sometimes."



*Written by Rick Johnson
Illustrated by Keith Kresge*



I was amazed! Another kid who knew about fishing!
Most kids thought fishing was “uncool.”

“There’s big turtles in that river,” Nate consoled me. “My Dad tells about one big snapping turtle he calls, ‘Old Thunder Turtle.’ He says it’s huge!”

From that day on, we were friends. We fished, traded CDs, and were both crazy about skateboarding. We even got jobs at the same grocery store. But fishing was our favorite thing. Fishing with Nate, for me, was a spiritual time. We never planned it, but the riverbank on Saturdays almost got to be like church for me. I can’t quite explain it, but lying by the river, sun a-shining, and Nate reciting prayers and stuff . . . well, your thoughts just get going on spiritual things.

I didn’t know it at first, but Nate loved God. He was a Bahá’í, which I didn’t know anything about in the beginning, but the thing that caught my attention was that Nate was happy. Most of my friends said they were happy, but you could see in their eyes they really weren’t.

“Nate,” I asked him one day, “why are you happy?”

His answer was unexpected: “O SON OF SPIRIT! Noble have I created thee, yet thou hast abased thyself. Rise then unto that for which thou wast created.” Jon, those words are direct from God. They mean I’m a noble person, with good inside me, no matter what. That makes me happy.”

“But, Nate, lots of people say they’ve got God’s words and they hate others and kill people. It looks like people make God to be the way they want Him to be.”

Nate smiled. He didn’t seem upset by what I’d said. “Jon, God’s not a thing. He’s a spirit. You can’t make Him a certain way and put Him in a box.”

“What’s a spirit?”

Nate thought before responding, “That’s an interesting question. Want to find the answer?”

“How?”

“Well, if I’m serious about a question, I pray, then reflect and meditate on the question for a few days. As I do that, the question becomes clearer in my mind, and I can investigate an answer. If you want, I’m sure that we’ll find an answer.”

I wasn’t a Bahá’í then, but Nate impressed me. He spoke with confidence, as if talking about God was the most natural thing in the world. Besides, he was the happiest person I knew. I was sure it had something to do with his faith.

“OK, Nate, I’m game. Let’s see what happens.”

I learned that Nate spent time each day learning new prayers and Writings by memory. He was memorizing all the Hidden Words, of which there were dozens! I was amazed at how many he could recite already.

“The Hidden Words are my favorite Holy Writings,” Nate said. “Bahá’u’lláh, whom Bahá’ís believe is God’s Messenger for today, says they are like a mini-summary of all God’s teachings throughout the ages.”

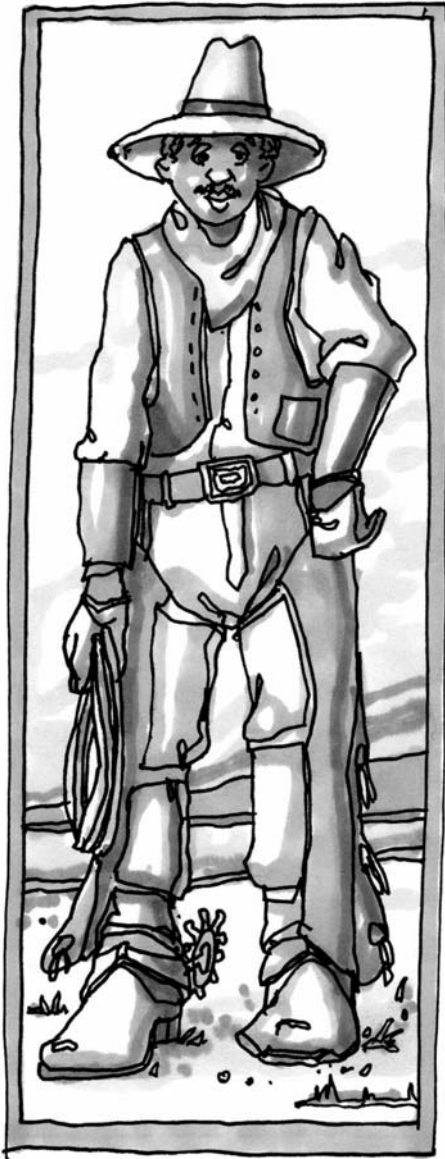
Over the next several weeks, Nate and I memorized and discussed many Hidden Words while we waited for fish to bite.

“Jon,” Nate said the first Saturday we studied together, “this is part of my answer to your question: ‘O SON OF BEING! Thou art My lamp and My light is in thee. Get thou from it thy radiance and seek none other than Me. For I have created thee rich and have bountifully shed My favor upon thee.’ God puts something magic inside us—He calls it ‘light’—and He’s the Source of that magic within us.”

“God is all colors, just like the light.” Nate continued.

“Sometimes people try to put God in a box, and make Him be just one way, but He’s always different than we can imagine Him to be.





I used to think that God shouldn't allow those ugly worms to get in apples, or mosquitoes to bite, or . . ."

". . . allow big snapping turtles to eat my fish!" I finished Nate's thought, laughing.

"Yes," Nate grinned, "those are some ways we try to box God in, but God constantly creates new things through the way different things interact. It takes sunshine water, and soil to grow a plant, for instance—not one of those elements alone will give you a tree."

"Maybe that's why there are both men and women in a family," I said. "And why there are so many different kinds of plants and animals . . ."

". . . and why there are different kinds of people!" Nate added.

I was beginning to see possibilities in this way of thinking, and as I learned some of the Hidden Words, they began to affect me. "O SON OF BEING! Love Me, that I may love thee. If thou lovest Me not, My love can in no wise reach thee. Know this, O servant." Even though I was not yet a Bahá'í, these words attracted me, and the full power of those words hit me the day I became a Bahá'í.¹

That day, as a gift, Nate gave me a photo of an African-American in cowboy clothes.

"That's a photo, Jon, of my great-great-grandfather, Fredrick King. He was a cowboy around here in the late 1800s."

"You're family of Fredrick King?" I said with surprise. "I did a history report on him in school—he came here as a freed slave after the Civil War."

"Yes," Nate replied, "he was on his way to Nicodemus.² He stopped here to earn some money before going on, fell in love with my great-great-grandmother, and never left."

"So it's like this," Nate said, "not only do Bahá'ís believe there is only one race, the human race, but I'm living proof that love doesn't stay in boxes very well."

"By chance," Nate continued, "while he was on a cattle-selling trip to Chicago in 1912, Fredrick happened to hear 'Abdu'l-Bahá speak to a large gathering of blacks and whites. He was impressed and taught the Bahá'í beliefs to his family. I want you to have one

¹ Although 'Frederick King' is fictional, a number of freed slaves did become cowboys on the Great Plains.

² A Kansas town founded and settled by African-Americans after the Civil War and now a National Historic Site.

of his photos, Jon. It means a lot to me. We really are one human family, no matter what some people think!”

I embraced Nate, and I felt a new understanding of one of the Hidden Words we’d memorized:

“O CHILDREN OF MEN! Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust? That no one should exalt himself over the other. Ponder at all times in your hearts how ye were created. Since We have created you all from one same substance it is incumbent on you to be even as one soul, to walk with the same feet, eat with the same mouth and dwell in the same land, that from your inmost being, by your deeds and actions, the signs of oneness and the essence of detachment may be made manifest.”

“Nate,” I said, “I think we answered my question. You can’t put God’s spirit in a box.”

“We were created to ask questions, Jon,” Nate said. “Questions are a way to find answers, and that is how God designed things. The creative power of God needs an active force, like you asking questions, for instance, and a receptive force, like me listening and responding as best I can. Then something new comes from that interaction.”

“That’s why you pray and read the Bahá’í Writings every day, isn’t it?” I asked. “Praying and reading the Writings is a way to be an active spiritual force.” “Love me that I may love thee. . . .” I was amazed at the beauty of the idea.

“You’ve got it, Jon!” Nate grinned. “Everything in God’s creation works like that. Bahá’u’lláh puts it this way:

“The world of existence came into being through the heat generated from the interaction between the active force and that which is its recipient. These two are the same, yet they are different. Thus doth the Great Announcement inform thee about this glorious structure.”

“God has a place for both catfish and turtles, doesn’t He?” I asked. “He likes diversity. He loves all kinds of people, and they’re all important to Him. We can’t put Him in a box that just suits us, can we?”

“That’s right, Jon.” Nate replied. “You and me, and Old Thunder Turtle, and Fredrick King—all of us—in our own way, have our special place in ‘this glorious structure.’” ★

