

A NEW CULTURE

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Ally had a plan. She'd made the plan last year after second grade Multiculture Week, after three years of learning culture out of a book.

In kindergarten, Ally chose to learn about Irish culture, because she liked the dancing. Her dad wasn't sure if there was Irish in their background. In first grade, Ally picked Swedish. In second grade, Ally's parents explained that their ancestors had come from many different countries. Over the years, their cultures got blended together. Ally's parents said that was OK, because Bahá'ís believe in unity in diversity. But Ally wanted a culture that truly felt like part of her life—not just one she read about in a book.

Ally's teacher, Mrs. Smolenski, wrote this year's theme on the whiteboard:

**MANY FAMILIES,
MANY TRADITIONS.**

Underneath, she wrote:

CULTURE

BEHAVIORS, BELIEFS, AND
CUSTOMS OF A LARGE OR
SMALL GROUP.

WAYS OF LIVING PASSED ON
FROM ONE PERSON TO ANOTHER.

Now, Mrs. Smolenski was writing the cultures of the students as they called them out: Mexican, Guatemalan, Hawaiian, Indian, Mexican-American Indian, Filipino, Taiwanese, Russian, Irish, Greek, African-American, Irish-Polish, Jamaican, Iranian, Scottish, Chinese, Korean, Japanese-Chinese-Norwegian. It was going to be Ally's turn—

"Persian!" Ally announced with gusto. Navi, her Persian friend, laughed good-naturedly. He had dark brown hair and huge brown eyes. Everyone turned to look at Ally. Despite

her blond hair and blue eyes, the class didn't seem surprised. After all, Ally and Navi were neighbors and walked to school together. They played together every day. Sometimes the other kids thought they were cousins.

Mrs. Smolenski looked puzzled. "Do you mean Iranian, like Navi?"

"Yes," Ally replied. "Iran used to be called Persia."

"Ally, where were you born?" Mrs. Smolenski asked.

"California."

"Where were your parents born?"

"California."

"Grandparents?"

"California."

"Great-grandparents?"

"Umm, Nevada." The class was snickering.

"Do you," Mrs. Smolenski asked in her patient voice, "have any ancestors from Iran?"

"Yes!" Ally was ready. "My cousins."

"Cousins are not ancestors. Ancestors are the relatives who come before you. They pass down 'ways of living,' like holidays, food, and language. Do you speak any Persian, Ally?"

"Sure. Beshin, maast, fes-en-june, polo, mersi."

"Which means?"

"Sit down, yogurt, pomegranate stew, rice, thanks!" The class laughed.

Mrs. Smolenski shook her head as if she were still not satisfied. "Ally, why is it so important to you to be Persian?"

Ally's heart froze. Should she tell the real reason? She could only say so much about religion at school. She hadn't planned to tell about the Bahá'í Faith, but now she had a chance. She took a big breath and said, "Because something special happened in Persia."

"What happened?"

"A great Teacher came to tell people about peace. He said, 'The earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens.' And His Name was Bahá'u'lláh." Ally finished breathlessly, relieved to get it all out.

"This Bahá . . ."

"Bahá'u'lláh," Ally pronounced. "He taught the Bahá'í Faith."

"So Bahá'í is the Persian religion?"

"No," said Navi. "Most



Iranians are Muslim, like me."

"No," repeated Ally. "The Bahá'í Faith is for the world."

"Well, religion is personal choice, Ally."

"Yes, behavior and belief." Ally pointed to the board.

"Religion is one part of culture, but that alone doesn't make you Persian."

Ally frowned. It had seemed like a good plan, and she had been so excited about Multi-culture Week.

"Can't she pretend?" asked Ewen, who sat next to Ally.

"Class, we're not pretending now. Ally, do you have any culture from your parents?"

"We're Bahá'ís," Ally said, feeling scared inside, but with a strong voice. "That's our culture. It's our religion, *and* our way of life."

Mrs. Smolenski paused. Then she said, "You don't have to be Persian to be a Bahá'í."

She turned to the board and wrote, "B." Then she waved for Ally to come up to the board.

Ally jumped up, almost tripping over Ewen in her excitement. At the board, she finished writing "Bahá'í" in her best handwriting, carefully putting the accents and apostrophe in the right places.

Ally slid back into her seat with a smile and a silent prayer. She looked up. There was a new culture on the board, and it was her own.

