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Persian Heritage

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FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

For this NoRouz issue I had another editorial that was ready for print. Because of the confusing events of the last few months I made a change to my topic to one I consider a crucial matter. It is a matter that occupies my mind day and night, and that is a search for a stronger voice and spokesperson to protect the integrity of the Iranian people throughout the world, especially in regards to American politics.

I have asked my readers and have even begged our readers to stop wishing to return to Iran. Instead, you should think in terms of protecting your children's future here, in the United States, which holds the pulse of the world. We need a strong and permanent voice and a strong lobby in Congress before it is too late. Our educated and wealthy community must begin to participate in government at the local, state and federal levels. We must all strive to have our own candidates, individuals who can truly represent us. Let us learn from other minorities and ethnic groups that unification is a source of power, while tearing each other apart creates "weak link."

Today at 4 A.M. I was delivering a baby. As usual the television was on. It was CNN, and Larry King was interviewing a famous American comedian and talk show host. Because of statements he made after the World Trade disaster, his job was in jeopardy. During the interview, Iran was discussed. He felt, in light of Iran being part of President Bush's "axis of evil," and because of the public demonstrations on the anniversary of the Revolution, when effigies of President Bush and the American flag were burned, that Iran should be flattened. He called the people of Iran the enemy of Americans and said that they deserve to be destroyed.

A cold sweat came over me. His words were similar to those of a former Iranian hostage, who sued Iran for millions of dollars. This hostage remembered sitting in a corner of his prison cell, and from his window he could see a young boy, about nine years old, holding a rifle and shouting "Death to America!" This child is probably now in his mid-twenties and I am sure that he still protests and shouts "Death to America!" But should words be enough to make someone believe Iran should be destroyed?

Though I am offended by the statements made on Larry King, I am not angry with Maher. It is his constitutional right to speak his mind — it's called "freedom of speech." What angers me is that Iranians as citizens are rarely given the opportunity to invoke their "freedom of speech" to defend themselves. When we do get the opportunity it is by someone who echoes Mr. King's guest's views. These words and thoughts keep the 1979 negative image of Iranians alive and well in America. How can we continue to allow this image of a few to become the image of the masses?

Not too long ago a professor from a university was a political candidate. His parents are Iranian and he is a citizen of the United States. Hoping that he would be a positive voice of Iranians in America many Iranians contributed to his campaign for political office, which was not successful. Today that person sits on television panels representing himself as an expert on Middle Eastern affairs and places Iran in the same category of Pakistan, Iraq, etc. again enhancing the evil.

From the first day that President Bush announced Iran's inclusion in his "axis of evil" there has been continuous demonstrations against the United States by Iranians. These demonstrations have been conveniently instigated by those who seek to continue to fuel the fire of hatred against the people of Iran and they are played over and over again.

I constantly hope that we will be able to find a solution to this problem, but even I am becoming hopeless. When I look at Iranian television produced in the States it is impossible to find a program that may remedy the agony Iranians are in. I am in. Why, because all that we see are shows that attack the present government of Iran or programs that sedate us against more important issues.

Why are Iranians in the United States constantly preparing a future that overthrows a government over which they have no control, rather than dealing with the problems that are in their own back yard and part of their future. Why do our wealthy and successful industrialists worry so much about the current economic crisis and so little about the general future of their children?



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As a child in Iran I remember the cold and snowy winters. The streets were not paved. All that protected us from the elements were the goulashes made of tire treads and glue, which covered our wool socks, handmade by the village people. After a few days of being exposed to the elements the glue would loosen and mud and moisture would be absorbed into our socks. It created a very acrid and unique odor. We would sit around the Korsi at night and the heat from the fire would intensify the smell. With the innocence of children we squeezed and rubbed our feet, hoping that these actions would make the smell disappear. Of course, these attempts were successful and we were soon banished from the room and ordered to wash our feet and socks.

As adults we continue to play these childish games, mostly because we do not want to recognize that we can be looked upon as terrorists. But the games we play today if we lose will have a greater consequence than being banished from the room. The game of denying our ethnicity can result in our permanent banishment from society and cause us to again lose our identity as we did during the Arab inva-

sion thousands of years ago. To think that denying your ethnicity will prevent you from being mixed up with the Iranians that the world sees as "outlaws" is a gross miscalculation. **We should not be playing games but rather defending our integrity and our honor. This can only be accomplished by using the proper channels to show the world that Iranians are not "outlaws," by good and valid leadership, and by strong representation.**

After twenty-three years of emotional torture toward Iran we still have been unable to separate ourselves from the government. This country has never considered the Cubans as enemies; the enemy was Castro and his government. This country does not consider the Iraqis as enemies; it is Saddam Hussain. This country does not consider the people of North Korea as an enemy; it is the Korean government. And this country does into consider the Afghani people as the enemy; it is the government of the Taliban. Why then is it that Iranians are the enemy of America and not the present government (if there is an enemy at all). How can the people of Iran, who desperately mourned after the tragic events of September 11, for the

American people and America, be considered America's enemy and mixed into the universal porridge of terrorism? America must be educated on the fact that Iran should not be identified with their Arab neighbors. **Iran has a separate identity. The only common denominator with these neighbors is their location in the Middle East and some aspects of a religion.**

I beg and I plead to our cultural, education and economic leaders to recognize that it is not too late to regain for Iranians their identity and credibility. But the window of opportunity is closing at a rapid pace. If we do not gain a credible and united voice, I fear that the future of Iranians all over the world, and especially in the United States, may turn out to be the same as that of the Japanese after WWII and the German's after WWI.

God, please give us our day and the respect deserved.

To all of you, our best wishes for a happy, healthy and prosperous New Year!

Shahrooz Alavi

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An Interview with Dr. S. M. Azmayesh

BY: Shahrokh Ahkami

As you know, more than fifty percent of the readers of Persian Heritage are American, or Iranian-American young generation, and they are not that familiar with irfan. I wanted you to introduce yourself and then I have some questions.



I start my talk by thanking you, thanking and appreciation for two reasons. First reason being that you have devoted yourself to publishing this very valuable publication which is a means of communication among the Iranians, the Persian speaking, and the Iran lovers throughout the world; and with its professional quality from every point of view, it has a positive impact on the thought processes of Iranians. Second because, you gave me an opportunity to communicate with the dear readers of your publication and talk a little about irfan and its place in Iran's culture.

I am one of the Iranians who are living away from the home country. It is now more than twenty-five years that I have gone from Tehran and resided in Paris. In Iran I obtained my Bachelor degree in criminal justice from the Tehran University's College of Law. After finishing military service in the month of Day, 1355 [After Hijrah, solar], corresponding to December 1976, I went to Paris France in order to continue my Law education. I enrolled in the fields of "Islamic Law" and "History of Law" at the University of Paris, which is known in Iran as the Sorbonne. Also I started studying at the school of higher education for theological studies, which is known as the Old Sorbonne and in the field of theology at the University of Lyons 2 in the city of Lyons.

In 1981 after finishing higher education and obtaining Doctoral degrees in the fields of theology and Islamic Law, while continuing my residence in France, I continued my Academic research. I strived to devote myself to introducing the bright face of the "Islamic irfan of Iran" by participating in various scientific lectures and seminars and by publishing articles and books. Also, from about eleven years ago, I started publishing "The Irfan of Iran Quarterly," and I authored numerous books in French and Farsi among which I can name "Soufi Travel With Ferdowsi Until Simorgh's Country" and "Still, As Before, The Sun Shines From The East," both in Farsi, and also "The Teachings of a Sufi Master" in French.

In addition to this, I am one of the sincere devotees of the Nematollahi Gonabadi order which is the oldest "inward path² order" among the Maroofieh⁴ orders of the "twelve Imam"³ Shiite faith, and the most wide spread path of sufism in Iran. So, if in France and French speaking countries there is anyone who may be interested in obtaining more information and accurate research specifically regarding Sufism and the Nematollahi order, I respond within the limits of my ability.

Now it is about a year and a half that I travel to the U.S.A. and Canada, and by conducting lectures and participating in seminars, and in scientific and cultural societies I familiarize the interested with Irfan, Shiism, Islam, and Sufism.

Irfan is a spiritual tendency that exists in all people. A few sparks from it, in the dark, cold winter nights, cause warmth inside the human being, and give good tidings that "the end of the dark night is light." Irfan is a collection of techniques and methods that using them gives any human being the possibility to increase the radiance and brightness of this inner flame, not only for warming inside self, but like a torch or light that also keeps its surroundings lit. As Hafiz has said:

In the Monastery they have me dear for the reason
That, the flame which never dies is always in our heart.

*What is the difference between religion and irfan?
Well, a person who is religious, why shouldn't he/
she take religion as sufficient for communication
with God?*

Religion is very general. Every religion includes many commands such as organization of relationships among people, or family rights from before birth to after death. Irfan, however, is the essence of all religions. There are lots of people who may be religious, but they may not have anything to do with developing spirituality, meaning the inward aspect of religion. Many people's interpretation of religion is from a political, social, moral, etc., point of view, or they look at religion with an eye of the argumentative, linguistic, or interpretive school, or with an eye of the religious law.

Irfan is the essential aspect of the religion's inward aspect, and as such it has to do with the essence of the inside of the human being's self.

If Hafiz⁵ says:

Forgive the entire "war of the seventy two nations."

Since they didn't see the truth, they took the path of fantasy.

Or, if Mawlana⁷ (Rumi) says:

Love is a stranger with the entire world,

And in it there are "seventy two" madness.

They are hinting to the essence of the invitation of all religions, which is their irfanic aspect. What does madness mean? It means freedom of one's hands and feet from restrictions, which bar her/him from paying attention to the main point; the main point being the development of the human being's inward faculty. The endless argumentative discussions that prevent the human being from attending to the expansion of the innate possibilities within him, are the restrictions that tie the hands and feet. One should become stranger with these restrictions and take the path of madness regarding them. The human being's mind/intellect is capable of designing great many questions; but it is not capable of answering even a small portion of the questions that itself designs. The power of the mind is in designing questions, and its weakness in answering these questions. The mind can

respond to a small portion of the questions, but the majority of intellectual questions, remain forever as insolvable puzzles. And those who are only after using their mind power and pure reasoning for answering the why's and how's, eventually they will often emerge from the door of confusion. Khayam (Omar, 1048-1122 A.D., famous for his quatrains) the great mathematician and intellectual from Nayshaboor (a city in northeastern Iran) while confessing to this weakness and inability, says:

My heart never became deprived of knowledge.
Little was left from the secrets that didn't become revealed.

I pondered day and night, for seventy-two years.
It became known to me that nothing became known.

Why? Because the mind can design paradoxical and opposing questions, and it can build puzzles that cause bewilderment. Hafiz says:

Tell stories from the music player and the wine, and seek
less the secret of the world.
Because no one has solved this puzzle by wisdom,
and no one will!

But *irfan*, which is recognizing self, believes that the human being instead of spending his time for designing these types of questions, he should direct his spirit's attention to some other affair and attend to expanding his extra sensory faculties, and to opening some other gates on himself, so that he can attain the possibility that with sticking his head out of those gates he can breathe in the heart pleasing open space of spirituality. Thus, *irfan* is the essence of all religions. In *irfan* all religions meet together in unity and friendship.

What is the difference between Sufism and Irfan?

Irfan is a descriptive infinitive from the third person singular verb "*Arafa, Yarefu*," meaning pure cognition. Sufism is a collection of techniques and methods, using which causes the uncovering of the inward faculties of the human being. But one can get to *irfan* by Yoga or Zen, or by following the inward tending Sabians, Jewish people, Christians, or Buddhists. *Irfan* is a position which, when the human being reaches it, his extra sensory faculties and perceptions are turned on and beyond the rank of the mind/intellect he finds another rank for cognition of the existence. Sufism is also one of these paths. This is a general response.

However, one must know that Sufism has been grafted with Islam. Although may be one can say the inward spiritual traditions that had existed before Islam, like inward tendencies in Christianity, Mazdaism, Zoroastrianism, after the appearance of Islam, left an influence on the inward directing method of Islam, but at the same time one can say that Islam also, along with its own appearance, brought a special method of inward tendency. Of course the Messenger of Islam (PBUH[®]), before the Mission and before Prophethood, was occupied with tending to inward. Definitely according to the historic records for a period of five years from the age of thirty five to forty years he was busy with developing his inward faculties based on the methods of the Christians who attended to the inward, and devoted his life to invocation/remembrance [of God], meditation, attentive observation, self-examination, solitude, and seclusion. He was after

opening the flow paths and the gate of his extrasensory faculties.

Those with inward tendencies who followed the Messenger as a "person with inward tendencies," later used to live in Medina in a group in a mosque and their occupation was love, affection, attending the inward affairs, and they became known as those "belonging to Soffeh" and they spread the lessons they got from the Messenger (PBUH) and from Ali Mortaza (PBUH), the student and the successor of Mohammad (PBUH), throughout the world in a heart to heart way which became popular as the Islamic Sufism.

Why are most people of Iran, Shiites? Why did Iranians believe in Ali this much and are sincere devotees to Ali?

The Messenger of Islam came in a very backward society with the tribal and clan type of relations based on slavery. He announced: "I am the Messenger" and he invited to Unity. In the clan relations of that era, women were banned from all societal rights and men less than forty years of age also did not have the right to vote or to expression of opinion. This dark era is known as the "ignorance era" ("dark ages") among the Arabs of those times. Also Koran in numerous verses has called that era the "ignorance era" (part of 48:26 "... in their hearts heat and cant — the heat and cant of Ignorance ...;" also part of 3:154 "...by their own feelings, moved by wrong suspicions about Allah — suspicions due to ignorance ..." and other verses...) in which the maximum amount of savageness and backwardness of the human being is apparent. In these conditions the Messenger had time only for presenting the Islamic values to the backward society of that day, and there was no time for training of individuals. He wanted them to abandon worshipping the idols, and to avoid bloodshed, burying girls alive, and the practice of slaveholding, etc., so that little by little they might turn toward human characteristics. The human being's honor is by means of these characteristics overcoming her/his being, although, this is a long-term affair. However, the individuals that had lived with the dark ages' values for seventy or eighty years of their lives and had fought over them, they would not accept the Koranic values and used to say: (part of 10:15) "either bring a different Koran, or convert and change this one so that we would accept it, otherwise we would not abandon our ignorant values."

In these circumstances, the only personality who was trained based on the manner of revelation and spiritual teachings, was Ali (PBUH) who since the age four was in the Messenger's house, and grew up under the Messenger's supervision and never in his life he prostrated to any idols.

We know that the Messenger, from childhood, had been reared in the house of his uncle, the honorable Abu Talib. Later on, he brought Ali, his uncle's son, i.e., Abu Talib's son, to his home and placed him under attention and training. In this manner, those moral principles and the essential and inward training traditions crystallized in Ali, and Ali became the personification of this school. In Koran God says (3:144) meaning "Mohammad (PBUH) is a Messenger similar to the other Messengers who came before him. If he is killed or dies, will all of you turn on your heels?" Those who became intensely attracted to the Messenger's spiritual perfections, and inward ranks were few. Slowly, the more the Messenger's situation was getting stable, especially after the migration to Madina, the more his followers were becoming numerous. These followers, however, were not

"companions of the truth," they were "companions of the booty (opportunity)" who were seeing that the wind was blowing from the direction of Mohammad's front. They were having their eyes on the booty. They didn't have anything to do with the truthfulness of Mohammad's invitation and the truth of the matter.

Finally, on the day of the conquest of Mecca, seventy days before the passing away of the Messenger of God, all of the opposition in Mecca converted to Islam so that their lives, properties, and lands stay safe. Then, the Messenger left this world. These people all their lives were faithful to their dark ages' culture and even one moment did not cease enmity with the Messenger. These people accepted Islam for the fear of losing their lives, but their hearts' attention was to ignorance and barbarism. This large group of people that had become Muslim in this manner was always waiting for the Messenger of God to leave the world and for returning to their dark ages' culture anew, but this time under the name of Islam.

Those who didn't have anything to do with the Messenger, in a more profound manner they didn't have anything to do with his textually documented successor, Ali. They told Ali that, "[since] the Messenger passed away, go sit in the corner of [your] house; we ourselves will take the affairs in our hands." Then they took the sword in hand and went around the world and conquered all the cities and countries from the borders of China to the heart of Europe in Poitier [?] of France and under the banner of Islam they scattered their dark ages' culture. But Ali, in these times, sheathed the "Zolfaghar" and in the corner of his house got busy with the inward training of the interested. Many of the Iranians who were paying attention to Koranic Truth, which is the antithesis of the dark ages' culture, turned to the door of Ali's house, in order to receive teaching and instruction and become trained. Ali, who had stayed away from the disputes, attended to the inward training [of these Iranians], among whom one can name Bazan Parsi, and Salman Parsi.

Salman was a researcher and seeker of the truth, who was striving in developing his extra sensory faculties through familiarization with Zoroastrianism, Mazdaism, Christianity, and Judaism in Zoroastrian monasteries, synagogues, temples, and churches. In searching to find a path toward God, Salman was searching for the Man of God. Finally, in Medina, he met the Messenger of God and [metaphorically] grasped the Messenger's gown and after him also Salman grasped the gown of the Messenger's successor, his Highness Ali. Salman was the manifestation of the verse [of Koran]: "There shall be no compulsion in religion..." (beginning of verse 2:256).

Salman and the ones like him were individuals that didn't accept Islam due to the fear of the sword or for the hope of the booty. These [individuals] were trained by Ali based on the same principles that the Messenger of God had trained Ali. According to their ability, they developed their own inward talents, and got them perfect. These individuals had an excessive love for Ali flowing in their entire being, and they were followers of Ali. Another reason for the wholesale believing in Ali and his progeny by the Iranians was that both had been subjected to unjust and harsh treatment of Arabs who were the followers of the values of the dark ages' school.

1. Simorgh, literary "thirty birds," is used as a singular word. It is the name of a mythical and mystical bird in Persian literature, which is usually associated with ultimate levels of Love and Spirituality. For example refer to the works (e.g. "The Speech of Birds") of the great Persian mystic ("arif"), poet, and writer Shaikh Attar Neishaboori.

2. The "inward path" is an attempt to translate the word "Tariqah," which has been regarded as the inward aspect of Islam concerned with the issues such as love of God, spiritual states, etc.; as contrasted with the outward aspect of Islam or "Shariah" which is concerned with issues like how to do the five times daily prayers, fasting, etc.

3. "order" is a translation for "silsila" an Arabic word meaning "chain." In here it refers to the chain of men who one at a time, by written permission from the twelfth Imam, have led the believers (Soufis) throughout times toward God, and specifically it refers to the followers of each of these leaders, again one group at a time.

4. Maroofieh: Related to Maroof Karkhi, a doorman of the eighth Imam (Ali Riza), who received training and permission from the eighth Imam to take "Walawi" kind of "Bayat" and lead the believers toward God. The chain of the leaders thus trained and appointed by the Imams following the eighth Imam, include Serri Saghati who succeeded Maroof Karkhi and Junaid Baghdadi who followed Serri Saghati. Junaid Baghdadi got permission from the twelfth Imam to appoint successors for himself during the Long Occultation.

5. The Shiite faith in Islam, follows Imam Ali as the true successor of Mohammad (Peace Be Upon Him). Among Shiites, the majority of the followers are the "twelve Imam" type of Shiites, meaning they believe in all twelve Imams, starting with Ali and eleven of his progeny (Peace Be Upon Them). Small groups of the followers of Imam Ali, who also call themselves Shiite, believe in fewer than all of the twelve Imams.

6. Shams-ud-Din Mohammad known as Hafiz, due to having had memorized the entire Koran, was one of the greatest mystic Persian poets who lived in the 14th century A.D. in the city of Shiraz. His tomb in Shiraz is a shrine as well as a popular tourist spot for thousands of visitors every year.

7. Jalal-ud-Din Mohammad Balkhi known as Mawlana or Molavi in Iran, and as Rumi in the West was another one of the greatest mystic Persian poets, whose collection of six books of couplets, collectively known as Masnavi is world famous. He has authored multiple other literal works. He was borne, in 1207 A.D. in Balkh, a city in the Northeastern province of the Persia, currently in Afghanistan. When he was five, along with family, he emigrated from Balkh, before the Mogul attack to Persia, to Baghdad, Iraq, and eventually to eastern Turkey. Some years after his marriage at age 19, he moved to Qonia and settled there. He died in 1273 A.D. at his home in Qonia.

8. PBUH: Peace Be Upon Him.

9. Zolfaghar: A double headed, double bladed sword sent down from God for Ali while accompanying Mohammad the Messenger of God in one of the battles.

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TRADITIONS, FESTIVITIES AND CEREMONIES

BY: Nazli Irani Monohan

From Her Book: *Wonders of Persia*

Ancient Persians, primarily farmers and herdsmen, had several festivities throughout the year to celebrate different aspects of nature. The most important of these festivities was the Persian New Year or Noe-Rooz. Still celebrated today, Noe-Rooz, which means "New Day," starts with the first day of spring in celebration of nature's rebirth.

Noe-Rooz or the Persian New Year Noe-Rooz is by far the biggest Persian festivity and is celebrated during the last five days of the old year and the first 13 days of the new year. As it is a national event, and not a religious occasion, Noe-Rooz is observed by all Iranians, regardless of their background or religious beliefs. Noe-Rooz has been celebrated throughout Iran's history. Each generation has tried to keep it alive and authentic, to celebrate it with more splendor, and to pass on to the next generation the secrets and mysteries of this cultural heritage.

Ancient Persians counted the year to be 360 days and each month had 30 days. The last 5 extra days were counted as part of the Noe-Rooz festival. They believed that their ancestors descended to earth during this time to celebrate nature's rebirth and to bring happiness to their living families. It was with this belief that every Iranian household went through a complete spring-cleaning starting almost a month prior to Noe-Rooz. All the silverware was polished, rugs and curtains were washed, windows were cleaned and colorful violets, pansies, and hyacinths were planted in the garden. Ladies of the house prepared a variety of delicious sweets. Everyone got brand new clothes from head to toe to complete the sense of freshness in the air and revival of life everywhere, and above all, to prepare for the welcoming of the ancestors.

Noe-Rooz Table

Persians welcome Noe-Rooz each spring by preparing the traditional Noe-Rooz table that includes the Haft Seen, or the "Seven S's." Haft Seen consists of at least seven items starting with the letter "S" in Persian. They symbolize life, health, happiness, and prosperity.

The Persian New Year begins with the very moment of the spring equinox, or Tahveel-e-Saal, meaning "the delivery of the year." A few hours before Tahveel, regardless of the time of day or night it may be, all members of the family wash up thoroughly and put on their brand new clothes and sit around the Noe-Rooz table waiting for the Tahveel and arrival of the New Year. These days radio and television stations broadcast special programs that include pre-Tahveel prayers by religious leaders and lectures by dignitaries right after the Tahveel. Children are encouraged to smile and be happy and think good thoughts as the ancient belief is that "What ever you do and think at these moments will remain with you for the rest of the year!" Candles burn on the Noe-Rooz table to brighten the beautiful arrangement.

In addition to the Haft Seen arrangement, the Noe-Rooz table is decorated with live gold fish (samak) swimming in a bowl of water and giving a "lively" feeling to the arrangement, one or more potted hyacinths (sonbol) giving out a sweet fragrance, coin (sekkeh) usually in gold or silver to bring wealth and prosperity to the family, and wild rue (seband) traditionally burned on fire in many Iranian households to keep out mishaps or the bad eye.

The Noe-Rooz table is further beautified with a large mirror, burning candles, colorful flowers, fresh fruits, home made sweets such as baklava, colored eggs, the blossoms and leaves of bitter orange (narenj) floating on water in a beautiful bowl, and last but not least, a volume of the holy Koran in Moslem households. These days, some people include framed pictures of absent family members to feel their presence during Tahveel.

Other Noe-Rooz Related Traditions

Haji Firooz

Haji Firooz is the official announcer of the approaching Noe-Rooz. About a month before the new year, small musical bands of three or four men, accompanied

by a singing and dancing Haji Firooz start going around neighborhoods everyday to announce the imminent arrival of Noe-Rooz. Haji Firooz is dressed in a red satin outfit with a cone shaped red hat and funny shoes similar to those of Aladdin's. He paints his face and hands charcoal black to disguise his identity, and dances to the music, singing songs about Noe-Rooz, and then goes around with a bowl to gather donations from the audience.

The appearance of Haji Firooz before Noe-Rooz has its roots in the ancient Persian tradition of the Mir-e-Noe-Rooz, or "the Commander of Noe-Rooz", who was selected by the king, and went around announcing the approaching Noe-Rooz and the time of festivity.

Deed-o-Bazdeed

After celebrating the Tahvvel at home with the immediate family and giving gifts of cash or coins to the children and youngsters, the essence of the New Year celebration begins. This is called Deed-o-Bazdeed, meaning visiting and revisiting. On the first day of Noe-Rooz, all of the older relatives and friends are visited everyone else begins visiting each other until all the relatives and friends have been to each other's houses. During the visiting, which sometimes is very brief, visitors are served tea, sweets, a mixture of dry fruits and nuts, and fresh fruits of the season.

The Noe-Rooz holiday is a time of joy and happiness, particularly for children. They have two weeks off from school, are proudly wearing their brand new clothes and shiny shoes, receive gifts (usually fresh bills with denominations depending on their age), go everywhere with the adults for Deed-o-Bazdeed, and get to eat a lot of sweets and candy. It is because of this atmosphere of joy in the air and the renewal of family ties and old friendships that every Iranian child grows up to love and cherish the Noe-Rooz holiday. It is the one strong bonding string that has kept together hundreds of generations of Persians like the pearls on a necklace.

Chahar Shanbeh Souri

Chahar Shanbeh means "Wednesday," and Souri means "feasting." On the eve of the last Wednesday of the year (Tuesday night), Chahar Shanbeh Souri is celebrated. Several events take place from early evening until long after dark, and are somewhat similar to Halloween.

Ajil Chahar Shanbeh Souri: A mix-

ture of dried fruits and nuts, including raisins, dried mulberries, white figs, apricots, roasted chick peas, pistachios, almonds, hazelnuts, and walnuts. This mixture is also called Ajil Moshkel Gosha, meaning "problem solving nuts," and is given away, hoping that problems go away and good wishes come true. The Ajil is later placed on the Noe-Rooz table and then served to all the guests who come for Deed-o-Bazdeed.

Gashogh Zani, or "Sounding of the Spoon": A fun tradition similar to trick-or-treating on Halloween. Usually the younger boys in the neighborhood wear a long veil (or chador) covering their face and body pretending to be a woman, and carry a metal bowl and a spoon (Gashogh). They then go door to door and start beating the spoon against the bowl in the hopes of getting some Ajil, and if very lucky, to get a glimpse of the neighborhood girls, and per-



haps select their future brides!

Jumping Over Fire: This is the highlight of the Chahar Shanbeh are gathered from nearby hills (or bought from street peddlers) to make small piles on the street or in the front yards. After night-fall, people light them up and start jumping over the small fires singing:

Zardi-ye man az toe

Sorkhi-ye toe az man

meaning "take from me my yellow and pale complexion and give me your red and healthy glow." In the background, you hear the sound of fire crackers everywhere that continue well into the night.

Sizdah Bedar

Sizdah-Bedar, meaning "Away With Thirteen", is the last part of the Noe-Rooz celebration and the official ending of the holidays. The thirteenth day of the new year is considered unlucky, and to get rid of the bad fortune it may bring, everyone goes outdoors for a picnic and to spend the day outside their homes. All the fields and parks outside of towns and villages are filled with families who prepare elabo-

rate food and picnic outdoors. They play music, sing and dance and children run around and play games.

Another tradition on this day is to take along, from the Haft Seen table, the Sabzeh or the sprouted wheat and lentil (which by now have grown quite tall) and throw them in the fields. And a secret tradition observed by unmarried young girls is to tie grass together, wishing to be married soon, and singing silently:

Saleh degar

Khoone-ye shohar

Bacheh Baghal

Meaning "Next year, in my husband's house, with a baby in my arms!"

Haft Seen, or the Seven S's

Seeb (apple): symbolizing health and nature's beauty and fresh aroma

Sabzeh (sprouted wheat or lentil seeds): as a symbol of growth and prosperity visible through the fields beginning to turn green where seeds germinate and grow

Samanu (a naturally sweet paste, similar to halvah, made from wheat sprouts): A symbol of birth and reproduction, samanu is one of the most famous food items on the Haft Seen table and has acquired an almost holy status. It takes a long time to prepare and some people vow to make and distribute it every Noe-Rooz if an illness in the family is cured. "Samanu Pazan," or "samanu cooking ceremony," is in itself a very interesting ritual. Several people gather around the large pot boiling slowly over a fire, taking turns to mix the combination of water and germinated wheat, and saying prayers for several hours until all the liquid is evaporated and the mixture turns into a sweet paste.

Senjed (dry and slightly sweet berry of the sorb tree): believed to symbolize the protection and the shade a tree provides in nature

Serkeh (vinegar): a common seasoning for food, and a popular preservative for relishes made with vegetables and fruits, vinegar is believed to have replaced wine on the Noe-Rooz table after Islam was introduced to Iran, since alcohol is prohibited in Islam

Sumagh (a spice): a tangy and sour tasting, grainy spice of a dark red color used to flavor Kabob and other meat preparations, sumagh symbolizes good flavor and taste

Seer (garlic): to eliminate illnesses of the old year and bring health to the family ■

AN INTRODUCTION TO PERSIAN MYTHOLOGY

By: Karim Mansouri, MD (Maryland)

Ancient Persia has gifted the world with not only a great monotheistic religion but with a plethora of folklore, poetry, literature, and myth as rich as its mighty civilization. In the previous issues of this magazine I presented an overview of genealogy social structure, and way of life of Persians of antiquity and touched upon the dualism that existed between religion and State; now with some trepidation and admission of paucity of my knowledge I am presenting a brief introduction to Persian mythology.

In every day language, one considers "myth" as something that is fanciful or untrue. *Oxford English Dictionary* begins the definition of the word "myth" as purely fictitious narrative; it's assumed that myths should be viewed as quasi-factual stories which could either be true or false. On the other hand, myths can be described as traditional stories originating in preliterate society, dealing mainly with supernatural beings, heroes, or ancestors.

The British historian and religious scholar, John R. Hinnells, states, "myths are expressions of man's reflection on the basic meaning of life. They are charters by which the man lives. They can act as the rational for a society, thus the myths provide instruments for ethical or religious conduct; they express and codify beliefs and they are the source of supernatural power."

When we attempt to explore the essence of Persian mythology, we are looking at the basic Persian view of the world, its understanding of man, society, and God. The myths of early settlers in Persia reflected their ways of life as warrior and nomads. While mesmerized by nature's beauty, they were awe struck by its apparent destructive power. Their gods and demons were either personifications of natural phenomena such as wind and storms or they were super-heroes who defeated and destroyed the demons and monsters that threatened them.

Overall, our knowledge of mythology of Persia is derived from a variety of sources. The most important of these is the Zoroastrian bible, *The Avesta*. The principal part of these complex writings which have been difficult to translate is *The Gathas*, the seventeen hymns of Zoroaster. *The Gathas* are embedded in *Yasna*, a collection of prayers and invocations chanted during the Zoroastrian sacrifice of the same name. One of the most important sections of *The Avesta* embodied in the twenty-four *Yashts*, or hymns to various gods.

The Gathas are of diverse origins and date. Some are pre-Zoroastrian hymns to the god "Haoma," which I will discuss later, but others are evidently Zoroastrian compositions. The prophet Zoroaster obviously had knowledge of traditional mythology of Persia, but in his instructions he adapted it in a more abstract form. Another source of information about Persian mythology is derived from the Pahlavi or middle Persian literature, which embodies a great variety of components: expositions and defense of the faith, visionary and apocalyptic material, wisdom and epic literature, poetry, and historical works.

A major source of Persian mythology is the colossal literary work of the great epic poet, Ferdowsi. In his masterpiece, *Shahnameh, The Book of Kings*, which consisted of 60,000 verses, reconstructs the Persian history from the day of creation to the Islamic conquest of Persia by the Arabs. Much of his narrative retains the underlying significance of cosmic battle between forces of good and evil manifested in an earthly struggle between good kings and tyrants.

There are other sources of information for the study of Persian mythology, such as the inscriptions of the Persian Kings, the ancient historians and writers, arts, coins, reliefs, and of course, what we have learned from archeology. For this presentation the writing of J. R. Hinnells has been invaluable. The reconstruction of myth is often a matter of debate among the scholars, so convergence of views in every aspect of mythology is not always attainable or universally acceptable.

According to Greek historians, the ancient Persians believed that the world was round and flat like a plate. The sky, to them was not infinite space, but a hard substance like rock crystal, which encompassed the world like a shell. The sun, moon, and constellations stood still over the Earth at the noonday position; all was peaceful and harmonious, but this tranquility was shattered by the entry of Evil into the universe. It crushed through the sky, plunged down into the water, and burst up through the center of the Earth, causing the Earth to shake and the mountains to grow. The chief mountain was Mount Alborz, which took 800 years to grow. On the rim of this mountain the Arezur ridge, thus created, which is the gateway to hell, where the demons discourse. The sun, moon, and constellations were shaken from their places so that they revolve around the Earth like crowns until the renovation of the universe. The rains were formed; they were blown together by the wind to form the cosmic ocean. This ocean is so wide that it contains thousands of lakes. The boundless ocean lies beyond the peak of Mount Alborz.

In the mythology of ancient Persia, there were many gods. The Persians believed that the gods were not remote beings, but powers encountered directly in the rituals of every day life. According to Herodotus, the ancient Persians used to ascend to the highest peaks of mountains and offer sacrifices to Zeus. They also would offer sacrifices to the Sun, the Moon, the Earth, Fire, Water, and Wind.

Vayu (Wind), creator of life in the rain cloud and of death in the Storm is one of the most mysterious gods of Indo-Iranians. He is a great yet enigmatic figure; both the creator (Ahura-Mazda) and the devil (Ahriman) offer sacrifices to him. *Tishtrya* is another figure associated with natural phenomenon, the rain. *Tishtrya* is the bright and glorious star, the first star, the seed of the waters, the source of rain, and fertility.

Another important goddess, *Arvi Sura Anahita* the strong undefiled water is the source of all waters upon the Earth, the cosmic ocean. She's the source of all fertility, purifying the seed of all males, sanctifying the womb of all females, and purifying the milk in the mother's breast. She's strong and bright, tall and beautiful, pure and nobly born. She's the subject of much adulation.

Atar, or Fire is the son of Ahura-Mazda, the visible sign of his presence, a symbol of his true order and the center of daily devotions of the faithful. Another ancient god of Persia, *Haoma*, is thought to be both plant and god. The plant is now identified as ephedra. It gives strength and healing in its natural state and much more so when it has been consecrated.

Ancient Persian mythology was not concerned only with

cosmic battles, abstract concepts, and ritual figures, but also with fabulous Divine heroes, the model of kingship, the brave hero, and the medicine man. The stories told of them at times verge on the legendary, rather than on mythical plane. Among them *Yima* (Jamshid) is most revered in Persia for his thousand years rule over the Earth, a rule characterized by peace and plenty. The world was so prosperous under his rule that it had to be made larger on three occasions. He stands as an ideal prototype of all kings, the model for all rulers to emulate. He was looked upon as a king and not a god. He's credited with instituting the great annual Persian festival of Now-Ruz.

In ancient Persia beside Jamshid, there are two other figures who are considered the first kings: Hooshang and Tahmuros. The former was ruler of the seven regions in ancient time. He ruled over men and demons. Before him, all sorcerers and demons fled down to darkness. Mount Demavand was the home of many demons and sorcerers and two-thirds of them were slain by valiant Hooshang. His reign saw the establishment of law on Earth and from him and his wife rose the race of the Iranians. Tahmuros, like Hooshang, defeated the demons, attacked idolatry, wizards, and witches, and propagated the true reverence for the Creator. In his fight against evil he is said to have transformed the Evil Spirit into the shape of a horse and rode him around the world for thirty years.

Another divine hero, Freydu (Thrateona) is remembered as the one who drove away sickness and fever from men and who slew Zahak, the lie demon, whom the Evil spirit created to destroy righteousness. His victory over Zahak gave Freydu the title of the most victorious of men, apart of course, from Zoroaster. Because of his triumph over the violence of Zahak he is invoked by the faithful to repel all those who are violent.

The Zoroastrian Creation myth is based upon the ancient concept of the universe. It is Ahura-Mazda who creates the sky, which functions not only as a shell enclosing the world, but also as a prison in which Ahriman is ensnared. Ahura-Mazda, the Wise Lord, is characterized by wisdom, undecieved and undecieving. He is the mother and father of creation. He made the paths of the sun, moon, and the stars. He's eternal, but at the present time he is not omnipotent, for he is limited by his archenemy, the Evil Spirit, Ahriman. The time will come, however, when Evil will be overcome and Ahura-Mazda will reign omnipotent.

The leader of demonic hordes is *Angra Manuy*. Ahriman. His aim is the ruin and destruction of the world. As Ahura-Mazda creates life, Ahriman creates death, for health he produces sickness, and instead of beauty, ugliness. All men's ills are due entirely to Ahriman. Of other faces of Evil, *Aeshma* is the demon of wrath, fury, and outrage; the personification of brutality which constantly is seeking to stir up strife and war. We already have spoken of another force of Evil, Zahak, who was defeated and imprisoned in Mt. Demavand by Freydu.

According to Zoroastrian mythology, the first human couple grew from the seed of *Kayumars* (Gayomart). At first, they grew together in the shape of a plant in such a manner that man and woman were indistinguishable. Together, they formed the tree whose fruit was the ten races of mankind. When they finally assumed human form, the Wise Lord instructed them in their responsibilities; however, Evil lurked at hand to seduce them from the path of truth. They declared that Evil Spirit was the Creator, thus committing man's first sin. Ever since there is an eternal struggle being waged between the forces of good and evil.

Based upon the historical facts and the mythological fables, Zoroaster as a prophet was a man born at a particular place and a particular time; even though we are not certain where or when. For the Greeks Zoroaster was considered the arch typical magus or priest. The Greek philosophers, Plato, Aristotle, and Socrates all knew of the prophet's teaching and his philosophy, and he was held in high esteem by them.

The coming of Zoroaster is believed to have been foretold. He was not conceived in the ordinary way, but from the Divine Glory, passing through the heavens to the Earth where he united himself with a girl of fifteen, the ideal age in Persian thought. According to Zoroastrian myth, at the birth of Zoroaster, all the creatures of Good Creation, the plants and the water rejoiced, but the demons were terror stricken. As soon as he was born he was able to converse with Ahura-Mazda. Conscious of his mission from the beginning, the prophet declared himself a worshipper of Ahura-Mazda. By the age of thirty Zoroaster had received his first vision even though his teaching was rejected initially. The prophet was resolute in the faith, steadfast in the recital of the sacred prayers, and faithful in his practice of Zoroastrian rituals.

As is true with most other religious traditions, the Zoroastrians believed that the hand of God was at work in the ministry of the great prophet, particularly in the early conversions. It was by the grace of God that the prophet Zoroaster visited the palace of the King Goshtasep (Vishtaspa). It was through the miracle performed by the prophet that the king accepted the faith, that the warrior prince, Esfandiyar agreed to fight for the Good Religion. In the process the king was granted his petition for a vision of his place in heaven and his son Peshootan was given immortality. The court was thus converted and the victorious march of the Zoroastrian faith began.

In official inscriptions of Darius I, we observe that beside Ahura-Mazda mention has been made of the other gods such as Mithra and Anahita; also emphasis was placed on the division of the real world into two categories of Good (oxen, dogs, plants, and metal) and Bad (wolves, serpents, etc.). Man stands in the middle being free to choose evil or to follow good, according to divine precepts. Further down into the evolution of Zoroastrianism all the eschatological ideas of the Mazdaic religion were given shape in the Mithraic mystery rites of initiation. There were complicated rituals, for instance, the spirit of the stimulant drink, Haoma was designated as a good spirit, and the rites of purifying Fire became more intricate. To avoid impurities harming either the Fire or Earth, a definite prohibition was placed on cremation as well as burial of the dead.

In the documented history of the Sassanid dynasty, kings were definitely thought of as divine. They were said to be the brothers of the sun and moon and were called gods. The king Khosrow depicted himself enthroned in heaven surrounded by stars.

Eschatology, the doctrines of the last things is a principal and central element of Zoroastrian teachings. It has influenced both the Hinduism and Buddhism in the East and Judaism and Christianity in the West and in some respect, as we shall see, has an uncanny resemblance of the Islamic teachings. There are two parts in this doctrine: the end of the individual and the end of the world.

According to this doctrine, after death, the soul hovers around the body for three nights. These nights are a time of anguish and consolation; at dawn after the third night each soul proceeds to its judgment. During the life of an individual a store of merits and faults has been laid up in the "House of Song." They will be judged by Mithra, Sroasha, and Rashnu. Every man is judged entirely on his own deeds. If the good thoughts, words, and deeds outweigh the evil the soul passes to heaven. If the evil

outweighs the good, then the soul is sent to hell. On the way to heaven or hell, the soul must cross the bridge of judgment (the Chinvat Bridge). One barrier that both the wicked and righteous are said to face crossing this bridge is the river of tears by the mourners. Excessive lamentation and weeping cause the river to swell, making it more difficult for the soul to pass over. For this reason, the Zoroastrians consider excessive lamentation a sin because it's harmful to the eyes of the mourner, yet it is no help to the deceased. When the soul passes to the place of reward or punishment, it doesn't enter an eternal state; the ideal of eternal punishment in hell is morally repugnant to a Zoroastrian, thus the Zoroastrian hell is a temporary existence that is made to fit the crime, but ultimately good triumph. Men will be resurrected from hell or heaven and the whole creation will be united with its source, the holy God.

According to the Zoroastrian concept, the history of the world lasts for 12,000 years. The final period in which evil is defeated is thought to have already started with the birth of Zoroaster, so that in Zoroastrian belief we are living in the final period of the world's history. The final period is subdivided into four lesser periods, each symbolized by a metal: gold, silver, steel, and iron. At the present we are in the iron period. When the religion is declining this will continue until the final savior will make an appearance. When the earth levels and man is restored to his ideal unity of body and soul, the whole creation will be once more the perfect combination of spirit and matters that God intended it to be.

Like any other religion, different beliefs and mythologies grew in Zoroastrianism, the main dissident group being the Zurvanites. It was popular during the Parthian period, but it was during the Sassanids that it appears to have come to the forefront. Zurvanite mythology is very difficult to construct; the Zurvanites sought unity behind the dualism of orthodox Zoroastrianism. The name of the sect derived from the name for the ultimate being: Zurvan. Time. They believed Zurvan was the ultimate source of both good and evil, the father of the brothers Ahura-Mazda and Ahriman. The major differences between Zurvanism and Zoroastrianism are based on the idea of the absolute as infinite space/time, the nature of Zurvan, the cynical attitude toward women in general, the belief in Ahura-Mazda and Ahriman as twins, the idea that Ahriman ruled the world for 9,000 years, fatalism, and materialism.

The mythology of Mithraism is interesting in the fact that Mithra was an important god in the history of many different countries at many different times. It was first worshipped a thousand years ago, and he's still venerated by Zoroastrians, today. Mithra is the one god who preserved Order or Truth. He is who attacks and defeats the demon of Lie. He is who judges when the contract concerning the different period of world history is completed. The ancient Persians before going into battle would pray to Mithra and according to Quintus Rufus, a Roman historian, the Persian king before going to battle would pass around the ranks of the armed men praying to the sun and Mithra and the sacred, eternal Fire. It is to be noted that Mithra was also an important Roman god, but Roman Mithraism has some similarity but remarkable differences from the Persian worship of Mithra.

In modern Zoroastrianism, Mithra plays a very important part in the ritual. The village shrines to Mithra in Iran and India are visited by the faithful on feast days and there they kindle fires, light candles, and make a small offering during their prayers to the great Yazata, the preserver of Truth and Order, the enemy of the Lie and the destroyer of falsehood.

It must be emphasized that this manuscript which is based mainly on Western sources is neither detailed nor a complete text, and as such, there might be inadvertent omissions of facts and commissions of errors.

Now, to reconstruct history from myth, based on the legendary history of Persia from the day of creation to the time of Arab invasion, the following passages from *The Book of Kings* will describe in vivid detail the stories of the first kings of Persia: Kayumars, the first man of the Zoroastrian myth of creation appears as the first king who ruled over the entire world. His domicile was in the mountains and he is depicted as wearing leopard skin. His rule, which lasted thirty years, was as benevolent as the sun. He's credited for discovering, clothing and food. Hooshang was the grandson of Kayumars and heir to the throne. He was given the task of exacting revenge on the black demon for the murder of his father Siyamak. Hooshang's army was consisted of wild and tame animals, birds and supernatural beings. He routed the army of the black demon and was able to chop his head off. With this victory achieved the aged Kayumars was able to die in peace and the victorious Hooshang assumed his throne of splendor. Three gifts for mankind arose from his reign: the use of metal, farming, and fire. Hooshang's son, Tahmuroz reigned for thirty years in which time he subjugated the demons so that he was able to pass to his son Jamshid (Yima) a world of peace.

Jamshid organized mankind into the various social classes. He so apart priests, established the warrior class, deputed some to be farmers and others to be concerned with other crafts. He introduced to the world the art of spinning and weaving, medicine and precious jewels. His reign was the time of peace and plenty. Men had no need to work and no one died. Jamshid fashioned himself a throne and had the demons lifted into the air so he sat on the throne. To celebrate that day was called a new day, thus the festival of Now-Ruz was born.

The above narrative is but a tiny fraction of rich Persian mythology and folklore as told by Ferdowsi. His epic literary masterpiece, *Shahnameh* is a compilation of fascinating tales in which we find mythological figures as historical kings and heroes such as: the legend of Rostam and Kay Qobad, Kay Kavus' war against the Demons, Sam and Simorgh, the seven trials of Rostam, the tragic tale of Sohrab, Rostam and Esfandiyar, the story of Siavash, the legend of Bizhan and Manizheh to mention a few. These and similar tales have passed the test of time for the past thousand years to be an indispensable part and parcel of Iranian identity and nationhood.

It is obvious that myth and history are completely intertwined not only in the Zoroastrian beliefs, but also as an integral part of Iranian history of the past, present and future. The history of each stage is seen as a perpetual struggle between the forces of good and evil as witnessed by nature and God.

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Nader Khalili is recognized throughout the world as an author, artist, teacher and architect. I am happy to have had the opportunity to interview this distinguished individual. Throughout the day I spent with him I was fascinated by the knowledge he has on a vast number of topics. It is my hope that through this interview you will come to know the man I met and discover the reasons for his success in all his endeavors. He currently lives in Hesperia, California where his institution CalEarth is located. There he continues to teach students from all over the world about the scientific aspects of building homes using the elements in their natural state.



INTERVIEW WITH NADER KHALILI

By: Kamshad Raiszadeh

How did you find your calling, your mission?

I have always been involved with building. My specialty was architecture and building skyscrapers. I also built them in America and elsewhere in the world. But, three years before the revolution, I closed my offices in Tehran and Los Angeles, and bought a motorcycle and went to the Iranian desert for five years. There I explored a new way of life. This was a turning point in my life. That's what that book *Racing Alone* is about. It is based on my journey through Iran and America. What was I searching for? I was trying to find a way to build housing for the people of the world, the homeless. In the desert, as I was working, I met five personalities: earth, water, air, fire and Rumi. Rumi is a 13th century poet, philosopher and mystic. With these elements, I formulated the philosophical basis of my work.

The Iranian Revolution was an extremely important part of my life. I felt that a crack in the system was created. Many people died or were imprisoned during this event. I was lucky enough just

to continue to work. Interestingly, it was a time when I was able to do whatever I wanted. Hundreds of students were coming to my village trying to help me. I believe they did this because they knew what I was trying to do for the people. It had nothing to do with the Shah, Khomeini or any political entity. Our work and mission was totally focused on integrating traditional and contemporary architecture to develop an architecture that can serve humanity today.

At that time, there were 800 million homeless throughout the world. Today that number has increased to 1.2 billion. Of course, this mission was also personal. I was going through a transformation in my life. Nearing 40, I had no idea what I was about to do or that doing it would have such an impact in the world. I was simply following my intuition. There is a psychiatrist who has been studying my work for the last 16 years. She once said to me, "You think you were only helping the homeless of the world with your ceramic house idea, it wasn't that simple. There was a fire within you that needed a vessel, a container. To hold that fire, you created shelters with ceramics, because ce-

ramics is the only thing that can hold fire. Those ceramic houses came through that transformation within you because you are working with alchemical principles." She actually wrote a letter to the Jung Institute in 1986, that she had discovered an archetype. She has read my book "Racing Alone" ten times and her sentiment is, "This man is an archetype who has followed his intuition, working through the culture of Persia, who had no knowledge that there is such a thing as individuation. By this intuitive way, he found a way to build houses in a way that had never been thought about before. He was creating these ceramic vessels as symbolic of his own alchemical transformation."

That is her interpretation, of course. For me, I was trying to build a cultural bridge between the Zoroastrians, Muslims (Islam), Persians, and the rest of the world. As a child, I was raised by my grandmother as a Shiite Moslem filled with mystic poetry. We didn't live in a ghetto, but in the lower income section of Tehran. It was a neighborhood that was filled with problems and fighting. Of course, I participated in these fights and as a result, I have had my head broken in seventeen

different places. As a child in this neighborhood, you had to fight to survive. Even with these battles, the mystic poetry that exists in the Persian culture remained in me. I remember the times when I was rebellious in high school, I would fast, but I would also go to church at night. Never could I understand the separation of different religious groups and their philosophies. Within me there is Christianity, Zoroastrian, Islam, Judaism. In me you will find a combination of physical and the spiritual.

Accordingly, I continued to search for unity outside of religion. I couldn't understand why everything in life is separated rather than being blended together to create something practical and beautiful. I think I felt this way because of my attachment to nature and earth. I do not want you to misunderstand me. I always had and continue to have a deep respect for all that I was raised with, but that was simply not enough for me. I had to move around to experience the world. This is one of the reasons I think Rumi's poetry is so great. When he died, there were many Moslems, Christians, Jews, Buddhists etc., who came to mourn him, because his message was universal, and in many ways so is our architecture at the Cal-Earth Institute.

Do you continue to believe in this diversity?

Yes! Eight months ago, we at Cal-Earth had an open house. Attending were twenty-five Black Moslems from South Central Los Angeles who wanted to build houses in the Watts section of Los Angeles. There were also eleven Evangelical Christians from Bakersfield, California. They came here to learn how to build a church. There were also two of my Jewish students who were becoming Rabbis. Present were four Native Americans, Navajo, Pueblos and two Buddhists from India. We assembled in the Rumi dome. I told them they were there because the earth connects us all together.

Your mission to create unity seemed to develop over the five years of your journey through the desert. Mythologically, a "hero" goes through a fateful journey to reach his/her destiny and to have an awakening. Odysseus went on his epic journey and Moses went on his walk to the top of the mountain. Both had

a burning inside of them that drove them forward. What did you feel that wasn't right that sent you on this journey for five years?

At the time I had no idea. I never really remember sitting down and deciding what I was going to do. Rumi has said:

"My soul is a kiln, happy with fire. It suffices for a kiln to be house of the fire."

It suffices to know that my life is overwhelmed by the fire that is inside me. There is really no need to explain why I am doing this or that. I found that Rumi went beyond all of these things. There have been thousands of books, magazines articles and papers written about Rumi, yet nobody has written about what he meant regarding earth, water, wind and fire. I took from the *Mathnavi* (the compilation of Rumi's poems, his greatest book of wisdom and unity) over a thousand lines dealing with earth, wind water and fire. Though Rumi was very Moslem, when he referred to fire, he was not referring to hell, as has been presumed. Rumi doesn't go that far. The fire that he talks about is the fire of transformation. You can always later find a reason for what you did but not know or need a reason while on your journey.

Now I know that I might have built these houses because of my attachment to the poor community in Tehran where I grew up with so many homeless and problems I always wanted to do something for that community. I also believe that another influence on me was the poetry of Hafiz, Saadi and Ferdowsi. The words they produced always filled my life. My grandmother, God bless her soul, used to sit and recite poetry to us. She would teach us to memorize, and then challenge us to recite what we had learned. Interestingly enough, she herself could not read, but she knew thousands of poems by heart. She would say that we needed to learn things that were of practical relevance. At least poetry would have a lasting practical use.

You seemed content by your sparse surroundings and built these new homes with the same sparseness. How did you remain content under these conditions?

We were a family of nine children, along with my parents and grandmother living in a house that had one large room. We were very happy with this situation because she had the energy to take care of

all of us. We did everything in this room. When doing homework, someone would roll over and kick us. We did not have any privacy. We would tell our grandmother that the room was too busy, that we could not study. She recited poetry:

"Have you every heard of an existence that is present and absent at the same time? I am among the crowd and my heart is somewhere else."

This way we learned how to be alone within a crowd. I learned that each person need not have his or her own bedroom. Many Iranians, who have become very rich here or even in Iran, built big houses with large bedrooms. They then will go to the end of the big bedroom, sit down and cry of boredom and loneliness. Happiness is not always brought by grandness. For me happiness was to live with my grandmother and all of my siblings sitting on the floor and learning. I enjoyed lying against the wall, instead of having furniture. I still live like that. You can see how these experiences would affect an architect's designs. At this time, the separative design with that little room with the two bedrooms is what the Latin Americans have come to see. NASA has come here because of the scale of this structure; it requires very little room.

In Persian life, you don't need to live and build in the Western style, because in the West everything is based on the nuclear family. A family of four or five, husband and wife and two kids or three kids can live in this super-adobe type structure of three rooms. The father and mother have a room, the rest of us are in one room, with one remaining living/shred room. When I was growing up, even though there were more rooms, we all wanted to huddle together. In the West, when you grow up and your family is rich, they give each kid a bedroom citing the need for the "kids' privacy." The privacy that we grew up with in Iran is the privacy of the family, not the privacy of individuals. That is why we have the "divar-e-hayat," the courtyard wall. The families are in need of privacy but each child does not need their own room. Except for the parents, the family does not need privacy.

When Iranians come to the West and prosper, they add rooms to their house. This interferes with our culture which is not based on the nuclear family. This is what happens when you copy exactly from the Western world. Similarly, in the West, we are taught to "tear down fences" to have a better neighborhood, which contradicts el-

ements of Persian Culture. There is a cowboy song "Don't Fence Me In." "I want to run free." Robert Frost's beautiful poetry says, "there is something that doesn't love a wall and wants it down." This is in opposition to the Persian culture.

Persian modern architecture comes to mind from Shemiran, a section of northern Tehran. When people modernized and remodeled, they took down their walls and they put up see through fences. What happened was "hayat," or the courtyard, was lost. The hayat provided the separation that allowed a family's privacy in relation to the outside world. In Iran, in fact, we begin by building a wall, not tearing it down. Neighbor, in Farsi, is "hamsayeh" which literally translates to "those who share the same shade of the wall." One neighbor has the shade in the morning and the other has the shade in the afternoon. So you begin by building a wall to create a good neighborhood, not by tearing down walls.

How does this translate to your architecture?

In Iran, shade is sparse, hence it is most efficient to share it. In the desert, a wall was used to break up the wind. Modern architecture, of course, tore down these walls to create the boulevard. The boulevard in the high desert of Iran where there is heavy wind would be a disaster. So you need to assimilate concepts from different cultures and take the best aspects that fit your circumstance. We need to understand that man can change his world and it's okay. The key is not to get stuck on any one set of ideas. That is why Americans have progressed so far because they forgive and let you try again.

What allowed you to escape the architectural norms and to forge your own very unique path?

First of all, my architecture begins with humbleness. What I create cannot be done with the ego. I cannot say, "I'm an architect, I am an aristocrat, from a royal family, and whatever I say goes." I have learned what families need. I have had many opportunities to work with extremely wealthy people, but I never lost sight of who I really am. It is easy to lose yourself within your ego. We can think that we are so creative and great, and forget the true importance of what we are doing. Fortunately I grew up sleeping in the courtyard and on

the roof, because I lived in a small town, in a small house in a very crowded area. I used to hike up into the mountains of Tajrish and Damavand every week. My landscape became the galaxies and the stars. My landscape was infinity. There was no limit as to where I could go and what I could imagine. So regardless of where I work today, whether it is in a leprosy village in India or NASA, or in New York City, it is all the same. That is how I see it. Why? Because I have respect for your opinion and consider others' ideas. If a student comes to me with good ideas, I will drop my idea and follow theirs. Why? Because I am after the essence of the essence of the essence. Rumi says:

*The water of the water
The light of the light
The earth of the earth
The secrets of life are written in*

energy-efficient dwelling needed by the poor, or that little room in that building with natural material that would bring simple pleasure to the poor or the wealthy, or that design that would be useful for NASA to colonize outer space. And why?, because I feel that the architecture I pursue is timeless. It works on the basis of timeless principles and materials. Leaning arches made of the most simple, timeless and ubiquitous material like soil will work anywhere. I am not afraid of using earth in place of concrete, steel, plastic and plexiglass. When I was invited to go to NASA, it was to try to build houses on the moon. I studied the moon. My first reaction was that all I had known or talked about was not on the moon; there was no earth, water, air and fire there. I reflected on this dilemma, and I read the poetry of



books and attempts are made to teach and understand them, but some of these secrets can only come when you are out in the desert. When you live in the desert, you have to shed yourself of your ego. Who you are and what you do is less important than the drop of rain that may fall or the flower that may blossom. That is why some of the greatest spirituality comes from the desert. Since your whole landscape is the sand and the sky, you need to and are forced to go within yourself. You are no longer frightened by the fact that you may or may not become an important architect should you decide to build great buildings. Yes, you may become a great architect if you build a grand City Hall. But to me, I thought that I could become a great architect if I could build that little room for the homeless, or that space and

Rumi for inspiration. Suddenly I found the answer. I realized that the universal elements were all there. When Rumi says search for the "water of water," what he really means is to search for the essence of liquidity. That's what the secret is. So, I looked at that soil and thought, "There's water, right there. That earth is water. Why? If I set the earth on fire, I create magma, lava. Lava is water, it flows."

So within that soil of the moon that seems dead, there is the essence of liquidity. Liquidity instead that comes from the water that the sun's fire can create. In Idaho Park, there is an area called the National Craters of The Moon. The passage of lava underground, with the tremendous heat and exhaust that is generated, has carved awesome lava tubes. I thought that the flow of magma on the moon might

have created similar subterranean caves. Accordingly, my suggestions to NASA lead to discovery of these caves.

Then, there is my cultural experience with "hamsayeh," or neighbor, those who share a common shade/shadow came to mind. The "yachchal" or translated literally, "ice pit" was amazing technology that existed in Iran. Ice would collect in the shadow of large 25-foot-high walls during the winter. In the summer, the shadow of the wall would allow storage of the ice, all based on the shade of the same wall. Modern age thinking brought down the "ice walls" because it was based on "old technology."

Using this old technology, I am designing cooling and heating systems on the moon. At the edges of the craters, a permanent shade exists with fixed temperatures of -170 degrees: the perfect "ice wall". For heat, I reflect the energy of sun into the dwelling. In effect putting fire inside the house. Most designers have created buildings in the sun and thus these homes and buildings require air conditioning. I design in the shade. After all the sun is free. When I presented this to NASA, at the National Academy of Science in Washington, D.C., my position was met with much enthusiasm. I have explained these concepts in my book "Sidewalks On The Moon."

An hour after my presentation, scientists invited me to Los Alamos National Laboratory. Several of the Los Alamos staff members, including a vularologist scientist, believed my concepts to be invaluable. Being that it was during the hostage crisis in Iran, I was told that

I would never get security clearance with my faded green card. Needless to say, I had a lecture in their physics auditorium on the concepts and how they could be made to work. There was no hesitation in their minds about the value of these concepts for planetary architecture.

Were you surprised by what you found in Los Alamos?

Yes, and I was not afraid to point this out to my colleagues. After they took me on a tour of the area, I turned to them and said, "I thought that I was going to a utopia. Instead I see an area where these scientists are destroying the environment. You have cut down all the trees. Great scientists would not do this. You are building houses that can be easily destroyed by the fierce fires in this area". I also told them that Los Alamos is surrounded by the best mountains and the best rocks. These are the

elements that must be considered in the development of this area, not wood! And, of course, I learned a great deal from them about fusion, fire plasma heat and the materials of the Moon and Mars.

What have these experiences with Western society shown you about Iranian and Eastern culture?

What I hope you see here is how rich our culture is in Iran. You can make dollars from the knowledge and wisdom if you like. You can compete with the highest technology, the brightest scientists, and the most insightful psychiatrists in the Western World, if you understand what the essence of liquidity means, the essence of the earth. You also must deeply comprehend the wisdom of the great mystic poets. Then all is possible. Rumi says:

*This rope lay hanging in my well
I pulled myself up on this rope
I was the most depressed person at the
bottom of the well
But now the whole world cannot hold
my happiness*

What does this sigh, this "Ahh," symbolize?

That's where knowledge of Farsi will help. What is meant by the sigh is a plea to God for transformation. This "Ahh" was transformed to a rope, a tangible way out. You turned my total grief and depression into happiness. That's action. That's a dynamic response.

The concept is similar to my use of the permanent shade and the low gravity of the moon. Scientists tell me that it is treacherous to walk on the moon and to tolerate its temperature. I could not understand what they meant, because once I changed my point of view, the moon became a paradise of architecture and building. I told the scientists that we could build structures six times bigger on the moon, since gravity there is one-sixth of that on earth. Due to the lack of atmosphere on the moon, the solar energy can be focused to reach up to 4,000 degrees centigrade. This means you can melt anything. You can create concrete from the soil of the moon, and cast this molten ceramic into a form and into a structure.

Our Persian culture has given us the ability to think beyond the data and use age-old principles in our daily lives. Rumi will show you how to change tangible to

intangible and intangible to tangible. Again this is something that you cannot get from a Western, data-oriented and analytical point of view. This is not wisdom. We don't learn wisdom from purely analytical and logical methods.

Let me give you more examples from the Persian culture. Saadi, our famous poet and teacher from the Persian town of Shiraz, wrote only 200 pages of prose, poetry in his *Golestan (Rose Garden)*, but the message is as alive as it was 600 years ago. Hafez, arguably the most famous Persian poet and mystic of them all, wrote maybe 500 poems. Their works are the compaction of the highest knowledge in the shortest form. Why is it that these works and the works of Rumi resonate with us today? It is because they discuss timeless principles that can be used for everlasting transformation and wisdom. In architecture, I search for these elegant and timeless principles.

Why did you choose this part of the world — Hesperia, California — with its high desert with treacherous extremes of weather, near multiple fault lines?

First of all, it was intuition. When I saw this place, I knew it was right. Another reason for this location is because it is one of the harshest places in the world to live as far as the environment goes. We have the worst earthquakes, the hottest summers, freezing winters, very high winds, flash floods, everything.

Remember that before coming here, I went to Santa Fe, New Mexico to build housing for the Native Americans. I was given large pieces of land both in Pueblos and Santa Fe. They wanted me to become the guru of Sufism and Rumi poetry. But again I chose this place because of the environment and the challenge it presented. And I knew that this would be the best location for me to best analyze my concepts and find solutions. I am a firm believer in the proverb that states:

*If your heroic dreams are hidden in the
lion's mouth
Empower yourself and seek it out from the
lion's mouth.*

This place presented me with the best, and most recognized natural laboratory I ever could imagine. By this I mean that if I can get a building permit for my buildings in California, the mother of all earthquake zones, then no one can question my designs or principles. No permit has ever

been granted for earth architecture in California, the state with the toughest building codes and the highest earthquake zoning laws. The inspectors would not even drink tea with us, fearing that it would cloud their objectivity and judgment.

You mean you made the impossible possible.

Almost. This brings up a point about Americans that in my opinion makes their life heroic. They are open-minded enough to listen to a new technique, they are willing to test it, and are also willing to say that they were wrong. The inspectors said that if they were not taught to be respectful, they would have all laughed out loud at me. He wants to build these houses out of sandbags in a Zone 4 California site. They just said that they were skeptical. When their earthquake simulating equipment broke 60 percent above all seismic requirements in the code, my dirt buildings were still standing, they were willing to give me a permit and say that they were wrong.

It seems that not only does your architecture employ simple, and ever-present ingredients, there is some symbolism and other concepts that you are expressing in these building blocks.

Yes. We use barbed wire and sandbags. Barbed wire and sandbags, both materials of war, are used for a peaceful housing purpose. I wish that this symbolism promotes a message of peace to our youth. Everybody has sandbags and soil. I hope that the knowledge of our common threads advance equality and the sacredness of all life. I have also used the concept of a kiln and ceramics. I hope this fire encourages transformation and advocates the great potential of the human spirit.

You really live the life of an alchemist and a transformer.

One of my life's mottos is said best in poetry:

*I am not telling you to be a salamander
or firefly
But if you are thinking of burning, burn
like a hero*

What this means to me is that one must forge forward headfirst unafraid of the outcome. If I fail, it will be a wonderful chapter in my next book. If I succeed, I will step into the higher realm. Rumi

talks of this when he writes:

*Like parched lips searching for water
Never let go of your quest
The quest itself
Is the key to all your desires.
The quest itself
Is your victorious army.*

This does not talk about success, only about effort.

You came to what you described as one of the worst places on earth at the worst time in the United States, being that there was so much anti-Iranian feeling after the hostage crisis. You still found your way. What was your path and how did you knock down the walls to achieve your dreams?

With much difficulty. I had a hard life growing up in Iran. So the toughness I faced here never scared me. Many years before the Islamic Revolution, I had come to the United States. After my education in Iran, to second year at the university, where I studied literature and philosophy, I hitchhiked to America. I rode a bus to Turkey and studied there. Then I hitchhiked my way to Paris, to Italy, back to Holland and then by boat, I crossed the Atlantic. When I reached San Francisco I had one bag on my back and \$65 in my pocket.

My survival instinct was challenged. It was while I was working in San Francisco and Los Angeles that I received my license as an architect. After graduating, I began lecturing on high-rise buildings. I felt the difficulties all along the way. But, I was able to push myself. I believe that this perseverance is the genius of many Iranians who come here. Each one finds his or her way. I feel that I am a survivor. I have seen these great characteristics in many Iranians. They are patient survivalists. Iranians waited out the Arabs through 200 years. By the time the Arabs left, there were hardly any Arabs, they were all Persianized Arabs. This is in our character and that is why I think that this is the greatest hope for our kids in this country, that they will adapt, integrate and keep their identity.

You seem to embrace some Iranian characteristics?

One of the greatest things that Iranians have is individuality, but that is also why we are often criticized. We are criticized because

we don't work as a team. When I was lecturing around America from North Dakota to Arizona, Iranians would come to see me. I was mesmerized by the way these people have adapted to the culture around them. Adaptability is also one of our greatest characteristics and is evident in history. Adaptability is how we survived the conquest of the Arabs and Mongols. How could that be looked on as a negative?

We are also described as being tricky and double-faced. That is a negative way to look at it. Iranians are survivors. After all, Iranians have a way with individual awakening and surviving. Other countries conquered by the Arabs lost their identity. Iran is the only country that is still Iran, with its culture and language intact. We continue to survive despite the fact that within Iran, we have so many different cultures and dialects. We could not have done this if we were a homogenous country, like here. Here, everything is similar. Everybody has the same food, same products. Iran has something that is different in every person, and every part of its land.

Were you ever reluctant to call yourself an Iranian?

As I stated earlier, when I came back here I knew that there would be prejudice against me. But I was never afraid to say where I came from; I wouldn't try to hide it. But, I also did not stand up and make a major point of it. This was not out of fear, but because I did not want my message to be overlooked due to a misconception of Iranians or Iran. When I would lecture at NASA's, I would simply point to pictures and say this is Yazd. This is Kashan. This is Boshroyah. This is architecture that is timeless. I did not need to elaborate more.

Do you have any advice for our readers?

Yes. Iranian youth must understand that as we have proven historically, we are survivors of the first. This is a part of who we are and our culture. It is the part that we must continue to pass from one generation to the next regardless of where we live. We must give the best of our culture to our children. By the example of our own lives we will make them proud of their Persian culture, and then they will proudly continue their treasures to the society of our adopted country. We must also teach our children to understand their culture and be proud of it. ■