

Learning Life Lessons
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At the beginning of May, I received an extraordinary communication that broke the monotony of hiding-at-home from Covid-019. Happily, this gratifying email correspondence continues to blossom.

An email and suggestion for a zoom meeting came to me from two brothers, one the holder of an endowed chair in the religion department at Oberlin College, Mohammad Jafar Mahallati (who goes by Amir), and the other, Mohammad Hossein Mahallati, a businessman and philanthropist in New York. Amir explained that he and his brother had spent years wanting to make contact with me without knowing how. Why? Because, by their account, my name was commonly heard in their household when they were children in the Shiraz home of a very prominent family of Shia clergy that go back to the early 19th century. “[Y]our name,” Amir wrote, “triggers lots of memories when my father, Ayatollah Mahallati of Shiraz mentioned your name many times with admiration and deep sense of friendship.”

Indeed, as a very callow—and beardless!--youth in 1965 and 1966 I did meet at least weekly with their father, then a young Shia clergyman, to discuss Islamic and Western Philosophy at a time when contact with the religious side of Iranian culture was discouraged both by Western governments and that of the Shah. The man with whom I met always had a twinkle in his eye and a chuckle in his voice to accompany his wise and tolerant words. I was told that he taught Arabic and Islamic philosophy at the local seminary (Khan Madrassah); I never learned that his father was a Grand Ayatollah. Those discussions and the character of my interlocutor, Majdeddin Mahallati, who later was recognized as an Ayatollah, have always been a high point of my two year’s residence in Shiraz. But I never imagined that our meetings had any lasting effect on a busy and successful young cleric from a very long line of distinguished religious leaders. (Ayatolla Mahallati’s picture appears in Fen Montaigne, “Iran: Testing the Waters of Reform,” *National Geographic* 196 (1; July1999), p. 32-33.)

Amir and Hossein have told me that they believed I was the first American anyone in their family had ever known and that Ayatollah Mahallati’s opposition to family members studying abroad was changed by our contact. In a later email, Hossein remarked “[T]he reappearance of your name in my mind during the blessed month of piety, is a divine gift, an answer to a 50 year search for the person who had such a wonderful impression on my late father that somehow paved the way of my destiny.” Despite the family’s long and illustrious history as leaders in opposing Western colonial attempts to dominate Iran, their father became the first high-ranking Shia cleric to visit the West. He developed a fascination with American culture; all of his five children were educated in the U.S. and are successful professionals here. Amir, the professor at Oberlin, inherited his father’s clerical responsibilities (especially for carrying on the many charities his father started); he goes back to Iran as a Hojatoleslam (a respected clerical rank below Ayatollah) for several months a year. (In a previous career, Amir was also Iran’s Ambassador to the UN towards the end of the Iran-Iraq war.) At Oberlin, he has established the Friendship Festivals that promote peace and understanding.

These revelations may seem too much like the denouement of a Dickens’ novel to be true, but they are real, even allowing for the generous expressiveness of Iranians (*ta’arof*), the sweetness of their language, and especially the warmth of natives of Shiraz (City of both Hafez and Sadi). They have caused me to re-evaluate the way I see my Peace Corps Service. While I

never felt at all guilty, I have always been convinced that I gained much more than I gave as a Peace Corps Volunteer. Mine was the classic personal Volunteer story. My two years in Shiraz were transformational: They made me the person I am today. However, I was convinced that I had failed to accomplish anything of lasting significance in terms of what successful, “real” Volunteers did—build mosques, bridges and schools in villages or mobilize impoverished local craftspeople to develop profitable international markets. The epitome of the successful volunteer is the late storied Barkley Moore, who spent more than six years (three tours) in his small town of Gonbad-i-Qavus and surrounding villages in Northeastern Iran where he founded a great many local social service and educational institutions and was beloved by the community.* Yes, I had many good Iranian friends, but again they all made *my* life richer and enabled *me* to learn Persian. My evening classes at the local youth club may have helped a few lower middle-class kids compete with students whose families could pay for English lessons at the American and British cultural agencies designed to influence Westernizing elites and the rising secular middle class. I also enjoyed teaching a handful of students in an introduction to Western philosophy at the local university and may have had marginal impact on a few of them, especially the Kurd who ultimately earned a PhD in psychology from Temple University. But how does another very smart expat Iranian academic with an American PhD compare with bridge-building and mobilizing communities for change within Iran? To be perfectly truthful, as I gradually gained greater understanding of Iran, its rich culture and comfortable adaptations to its extraordinary environment, I began to believe that Iranians, at least those living in cities like Shiraz, had the capacity to achieve any needed change on their own--aside from political change, which PCVs were not supposed to think about.

Thus, my epiphany over this last month has involved becoming conscious of the existence of unimagined streams of value flowing from my quotidian actions over half a century ago. Despite remaining far outside my ken until now, those commonplace activities of daily living apparently possessed much greater consequence than I could have imagined. I shall forever be grateful to Amir and Hossein for jolting me into this reality. But Rumi said it more elegantly:

But don't be satisfied with stories,
how things have gone with others. Unfold
your own myth, without complicated explanation,
so everyone will understand the passage,
We have opened you.

Start walking toward Shams. Your legs will get heavy
and tired. Then comes a moment
of feeling the wings you've grown,
lifting.

* Glen Barkley Moore (1941-1994), who trained in Iran IV Group in Logan Utah in Community Development with me, served three Peace Corps tours (1964-1970) and returned to the U.S. to work at his alma mater, Oneida Baptist Institute. In 1972 he became the ninth president of OBI, which had been founded in 1899 to educate poor children in Kentucky. His presidency was cut short by his untimely death.