

My Father's Advice

By Mary Elaine Hegland (Mahabad, 1966-68)



Mary Hegland

"If I were young, I'd go into the Peace Corps." That was what my father, Reverend Norval Hegland, suggested to me when I was a college junior. It made sense since he had a streak of adventure in him. As a young man, he was setting off for a mission in South Africa when World War II stopped him. Later, the "Lutheran Eskimo Mission" called him to serve in Teller, Alaska, where he flew the church's Piper Cub airplane to various remote village missions.

I followed his recommendation and taught English in the girls' high school of Mahabad, the largest Kurdish city in Iran. Those two years established the pathway for the remainder of my life.

Fascinated by the different culture and way of life in Iran, and perhaps influenced by my unusual childhood, after leaving the Peace Corps I studied cultural anthropology. In June 1978, I traveled back to Iran for my Ph.D. research. While living in "Aliabad," a village not far from Shiraz, I was able to observe at first hand the dynamics of the Iranian revolutionary movement, as villagers focused on the national political conflict.

Most of the local people became supporters of the revolutionary movement upon hearing about and observing the brutal behavior of government forces, especially after violence right in the village. I found that local-level politics and the local political system and political understandings channeled people's analyses, decision-making, and activities during the Iranian Revolution. I wrote about these political dynamics in *Days of Revolution: Political Conflict in an Iranian Village* (Stanford University Press, 2014).

For most of "Aliabad's" villagers, it was only after deciding to join the revolutionary movement that they turned to political participation and resistance. The organizational method available to them at the national level for political involvement consisted of the Shia Muslim framework of rituals, symbols, myths, personnel, networks, and sites. Since the revolution, however, many "Aliabadis" have begun to question how Shia Islam and its rituals have been applied to government. Having returned several times recently, I am now writing a book about the dynamics of religion and politics in "Aliabad."

Looking back fifty years and pondering what an effect those few words—"If I were young, I'd go into the Peace Corps"—have had on my life, I am grateful. My time as a volunteer put me on a course to a wonderful, unique, and adventurous life. I have become close to many Iranians and attached to the country and its people. My Iranian experiences have also brought distress, depression, and anxiety as developments in Iran have unfolded and my friends face problems. Despite that, I would not exchange my past for another kind of life. For that, I have my father and his words of advice to thank.

[A review of Mary's book by Tom Ricks (Mashhad/Mahabad, 1964-66) can be found in *KhabarNameh*, September 2014, p. 5.]