

توانا بود هرکه دانا بود

Saturday Morning Get-Together Breakfast, August 8, 2009



Respectfully submitted by

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Class of 1974

If one can put the students of Community School and Iranzamin in a nutshell, besides the fact that we turn heads wherever we go, it was that we celebrated our differences, but we didn't put them in boxes. Our neighbours south of the border call it the "**melting pot**;" more acclimated to the Canadian palette is the term "**multiculturalism**." Then there is the word "**tolerance**," but that is an obscenity in my dictionary. And then there is "**co-existence**?" Further still...the capacity to find the universal among "**plurality**?"

At a Class of 1972 Montreal reunion upon which I piggy backed a few years ago, one of my sister, Cynthia's teachers was asked to speak about his most memorable experience in the faculty. "*What can I say? You sat on your chairs' edges, looked straight into my eyes and told me with your facial expressions and body language to come back the next day with more. I started each day with the challenge that I had better cut a good one today!*"

I saw that expression on the face of a young alumnus of Community School. She was only twelve. Her silhouette grew to life-size as she approached me in the massive lobby of our condo high rise in Teheran. She recognized me from my roles in *West Side Story* and *The Diary of Anne Frank*. The year was 1980. It sounds Orwellian,

but the other dimension of it was my spectacular reconnection with Community School, as it started to feel a little closer than continents away. I will tell you in a minute about my family's predicament at the time. But back to the little girl, the significance of our chance encounter lay in what we both gave each other. It had little to do with words...more to do with the **way in which** we interfaced. To me, this is quintessential Community School, and what convinces me that as alumni, our potential as a force for good in the world is formidable indeed.

My simple appearance transported the little girl to a time and place where differences were irrelevant at best, and in the least, they were flexible like flags billowing in the breeze of amity. They intermingled, but they kept their colors within the mix, because each was appreciated for what it added to the whole. When she spoke, she made sure to enunciate every syllable and every sharp phrase with accuracy, while an image floated in my head that I, too, like the speaker before me, wish so much to share with you today. I saw the metal poles of our flags marching by, an endless column of colors floating right above her head as she poured her heart and reached out to me, to her fellow alumnus.

She, in turn, provided a platform where my mind, in the ensuing months, transcended the cast iron gate of the prison door at Evin, its thick glass window that separated us from my father on the other side, and the glassy eyed faces at every checkpoint.

I was transported to a higher level, a sophisticated mind zone, where obstacles were superfluous and sharp thinking saw opportunity in every nook and cranny and crack in the wall. I abandoned the habit, of despair at our eroded lifestyle, and went on to save my father's life from the hands of a judge who sentenced his own twenty year old son.

Her last half year of secular learning, she lamented, was sixth grade. That was before she and her classmates got dispersed due to the changes that shunned the way in which we were taught from first grade until twelfth. Everything we were taught to be true had suddenly come under fire, namely that "education" draws out from the

student's own intuitive sense. It was replaced by indoctrination: where the teacher is concerned primarily to advance his or her position.

*“They closed down our school. My friends and I won’t **know** what it’s like to finish at Community School like you and your classmates did,”* she bravely uttered. Little did I know at that moment when time stood still, how much the yearning adulation in her face had done to rekindle flickers of hope in **my** turbulent heart, and how it ushered in thoughts such as: perhaps the answer does lie within... perhaps Community School did, in fact, give me all the ingredients I need to conquer any situation, not least of all a face-off with the mullah in whose hands my father’s life remained suspended for the past two restless years.

Just what was it in our childhood that made us likely winners in the game of life? Please, no one tell me the word “**tolerance**,” for I am allergic to that term. Perhaps we can get help from the people’s web encyclopedia. This is what Wikipedia has about the origins of “**multiculturalism**:”

*“In *Pluralistic Universe* (1909), William James espoused the idea of a "plural society." James saw pluralism as "crucial to the formation of philosophical and social [humanism](#) to help build a better, more egalitarian society.”^[14]*

*“In the [Western](#) English-speaking countries, multiculturalism as an official national policy started in **Canada in 1971**, followed by Australia in 1973.^[15] It was quickly adopted as official policy by most member-states of the [European Union](#). Recently, right-of-center governments in several European states—notably the [Netherlands](#) and [Denmark](#)— have reversed the national policy and returned to an official monoculturalism.^[15] A similar reversal is the subject of debate in the United Kingdom, among others, due to evidence of incipient segregation and anxieties over ‘home-grown’... ”(the “**T**” [word](#)).^[16]*

You may therefore consider that multiculturalism is doomed to be passé. I for one prefer to champion it, while keeping a watchful eye to act upon whatever conscience calls upon us to do in order to protect the common good. And, I will add, that here in Canada, one hears the word “**mosaic**” from time to time. I don’t know about you, but I happen to think this is as close as one gets to touching on our unique spirit as a vibrant student body! That spirit is embodied not only in ourselves here, but also perhaps in the kids we brought into the world. I see it in my own kids from one day to the next.

The authenticity of Community School was even more so because we coexisted on the soil of Cyrus the Great. And we were doing what Darius may have had us do as his willing subjects...work together.

Work, the area of human existence that covers the hugest portion of most people’s day...It truly can unite. When people join in to pool their efforts, that’s where the magic begins, and who is to point to any limit of what can be achieved when your ultimate goal is to be a viable part of a whole that’s a sum of its parts? There may be some, like tyrants and fanatics. But cruelty is foundationless. “Zolm paydar neest,” my friend, Afsaneh Ansari’s father, another neighbour, said when he learned of my father’s incarceration. Perhaps there is wisdom in that phrase...I dared to believe this back then. I still hang **on** to that belief today.

We often talk about how each day at school was a celebration of our plurality, our multiculturalism. That’s looking at us horizontally.

But we can look at ourselves vertically, too...as in... how far we went to pass the treasure to our children, which by and large may be observed as a natural phenomenon. How readily did we demonstrate that treasure in our daily affairs? **Consider this then. As children we learned. And, if children can learn, then so can we.**

Personal Success Coach Dr. Joe Rubino recently wrote, and I quote: *“High overall self-esteem means being competent and capable of producing a result in every area of life. This includes being effective in our relationships and in our communication with others with an appreciation for **what it is like in the world of other people.**”*

Community and Iranzamin Schools gave us a distinct advantage in that sense. They gave their students a platform from which to learn what it means to be citizens of the world community. All we needed to realize was to commit ourselves as perpetual students of personal development, fully aware that those around us, our children and grandchildren to start with, will thus be better equipped to model their actions and their approach to life.

That said, **have we** now arrived at a **NEW** metaphor or synonym, if you will, for multiculturalism...and can that be “**self esteem?**” Where one is unable to appreciate another...does that not flag a sense of inadequacy in oneself? What Community School gave us was an unquestionable awareness that we were richer for that plurality. This attitude was our modus operandi, and what better way to describe it, than through anecdote. I have one of my own to share with you today.

It was the summer of 2008. On a visit to my parents who live in New York, chance willed my path upon some older alumnae, former classmates of my oldest sister, Maureen. The setting was a trendy French restaurant in Soho. As I looked up from my glass of red wine, a New York executive and his associate observed us from the next table, and it soon became obvious their curiosity had settled on ours. He struck a conversation first with Ismini, who sat closest, and discovered she came from Greece, although she had flown from her home in Blackpool, England to visit her sister in New Jersey, who sat next to her. I announced that I was Persian with Iraqi origins but that I hailed from Montreal, and that my sister, Maureen, was a New York City dweller from the West Side who simply took the subway to make it to that mini high school reunion.

“Something about this group grabbed our attention and we just had to find out where you all are from!” They both bid a gentleman’s farewell and disappeared past the vast marble vase of blooming jasmines into the sunny afternoon outside.

Someone cracked a joke about Persian class, while others shared sheepish reminiscences about our stricter than strict dean up at administration. That’s when a smiling Talma, mute and motionless, produced herself from who knows where, and broke into flamboyant

helloes, while Ismini turned from our own conversation to notice her looming above our table.

“A man stopped me on my way in and asked if I’m with *the Greeks?*” exclaimed a jubilant Talma. After several rounds of hearty laughter, I faced my sister’s former classmates and proclaimed: “I have an explanation for this.” Talma mirthfully slid into her seat, and I explained. “Community School turns heads because she carries a shine all of her own,” I chimed as the group’s laughter mingled with mirth at our boisterous table in Soho, in our mini alumni reunion at Balthazar.

Isn’t that why we assemble every few years as we have done here this weekend? Were we not then as now, an assembly of not only languages, nationalities and different races, but also of religions? We hardly took note or even were aware of our different faiths when interacting in class or by the coke stand, on the soccer court or in the library. We were happy to belong to the family of nations, and that was the sum total of our concerns as students of Community and Iranzamin.

My daughter once said I needn’t doubt whether I’d given my son and herself the best that was possible as a single mom: “You gave us the tools,” she said. Our day and age demands that our MOSAIC be expounded upon for the common good. Perhaps, therein lies our calling, indeed, as alumni entrusted to transmit the legacy of a Golden Age we once knew. So, besides turning heads wherever we go, may we continue to celebrate our differences without the need to categorize and box them as too many others have done.