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Improvisation in a Persian Garden

WE BEGIN IN A PERSIAN GARDEN. In summer it would be filled with scent and color, but on this midwinter day, some twenty years ago, only the bones of the garden and its geometries were visible: a classic walled garden, with ranks of leafless fruit trees between patches of dirty snow and rosebushes recognizable by their thorns. There was a row of dark cypresses along one end and a dry watercourse down the center, clogged with leaves.

I had arrived in Tehran in January 1972 with my husband, Barkev, and our two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Sevanne, known as Vanni, for the beginning of a period of research, teaching, and institution building in a culture and language new to both of us, even though I had studied the Islamic tradition in the Arab world and Barkev had grown up as an Armenian Christian in Aleppo, Syria. The day before, we had gone to tea—in fact, cocktails—at the home of our new landlords, and when they heard

that I was an anthropologist, they invited us to come with them the next day to a garden on family land in a village near Tehran, where they would observe Eyd-e Qorban, the Feast of Sacrifice.

At the same time that pilgrims are performing the Meccan pilgrimage, Muslims around the world are celebrating some of the steps of that weeklong ritual, one of which is an animal sacrifice, usually a sheep or a camel. It is said that in Saudi Arabia so many sheep and camels are slaughtered by pilgrims that they are simply plowed under by bulldozers. Many families in Iran also sacrifice a sheep on the Feast of Sacrifice, and here the meat is traditionally given to the poor. When our landlady invited us, although Barkev could not come, well, of course I said I would, but I would have to bring Vanni with me.

On the way to the country, I began to have second thoughts and found myself running a mental race with the car, trying to work out the implications of the invitation I had lightheartedly accepted: to come and see a sheep being slaughtered, bringing a two-year-old child. I worried about what to say to her, how she would react. I went back over the memory of seeing the necks of chickens wrung when I was a child, before chickens came reliably headless, neatly butchered, and wrapped in plastic on little nonbiodegradable white trays. Those who eat meat, I told myself, should at least know where it comes from. That trip to Iran was not the first time I had entered a strange culture, but it was the first time I had done so with a child, and this was the first of many moments when the double identity of mother and field-worker led me down new paths of reflection.

I know now that to be in such a garden was to stand in the middle of a vision of the world. In the Persian tradition, a garden is itself a cosmological statement, a diagram reiterated in the design of carpets and the way they are used. Gardens are generally symmetrical in plan, but within that ordered framework the rich particularity is varied and relaxed. Gardens are bounded, walled; within, all is fertile and hospitable, but there is always an awareness of a world outside that is less benign, an unruly and formless realm of desert harshness and marauding strangers.

Water is a part of every garden, either flowing water or a pool large enough for the ritual washing that precedes prayer. House agents used to point out the pools to Westerners as wading pools for their children, but in fact these pools, reflecting and doubling garden and sky, focus the ideals of purity and generosity. The shah built a palace in the northern part of Tehran, at the high edge of the city, so water from the palace garden would symbolically flow down through the city to his subjects. Every garden is a promise of the paradise to which the faithful will go after death.

It was a cold, gray day, and all of us were bundled up. My hostess, elegant in a fur coat and stylish boots, explained that the butchering would be done by the gardener. She herself, she said, could never bear to look on at the moment the sheep was killed. When we arrived we found the gardener and his whole family waiting: his wife, wearing the dark printed cotton veil of a village woman, and three children of different ages. Our gathering modeled the tensions of Iranian society before the revolution: the affluent, Westernized urbanites, the villagers, the performance of

a ritual that rooted all of them in the past—all this in a setting with its own affirmations about the relationships between God and humankind and the nature of the cosmos.

The sacrifice of a sheep links several religious traditions. The Patriarch Abraham, we are told, was commanded by God to sacrifice his son—Ishmael in the Islamic version, Isaac for Jews and Christians; then, at the last moment, he was provided with a ram as a substitute. The story is emphasized most in Islam, representing the value of total submission to the will of God, a God who proves compassionate. Volumes have been written about the relationship between this single observance and older traditions of human and animal sacrifice and their echoes in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic worship. In the rituals of Passover and Easter, the recurrent sacrifice is reshaped in various ways: the shank bone of a lamb on the Seder table, the Lamb of God imaged in the single atoning sacrifice of Good Friday and its year-round memorials. There in that garden an ancient symbol connecting many faiths was still a real sheep that would bleed real blood.

The sheep was given a drink of water and turned toward the south, toward Mecca. Then, saying "in the name of God" and "Allahu Akbar," the gardener quickly slit its throat, letting the blood gush out into a ditch. I was holding Vanni on my hip and explaining what was happening, for children can handle such scenes (including those we see every day on television) if they see them in the company of an adult who both interprets and sets an emotional tone.

The sheep was skinned and its various organs removed. The gardener made a slit above one hind hoof and began to blow into it, forcing air under the skin to separate it from the flesh, so the body gradually puffed out and he could slit down the front and remove the woolly pelt. Deftly he spread the fleece, wool side down, on the ground, to receive the various edible organs one by one. "See, Vanni," I said, "that's a heart; every animal has one. Its job is pushing the blood around the body all the time." I wondered if I should introduce the word *pump*? No time. Intestines, stomach, liver...some were harder than others to explain, and my mind was racing for vocabulary to convey an understanding of the similarity of all mammals that would not trigger too much identification with the dead sheep. The fleece and the organs neatly laid out upon it would be the butcher's portion.

I had slipped into a teaching role, taking advantage of the visual aids to give a minilecture about each organ, using a vocabulary appropriate to a verbal two-and-a-half-year-old. Then suddenly, just as I was saying, "That big thing is a lung, see, for pulling in air and breathing, and the sheep has two of them, just like we do—here comes the other," I thought, with a moment of intense shock, Why, it's huge. In fact, I had never observed the death or dissection of any mammal larger than a mouse. Because I had an abstract knowledge of anatomy, distanced from the reality, and because I was preoccupied with Vanni's experience, it was almost impossible to realize that I was encountering something new myself. What I was passing on to her was not knowledge based on direct experience but a set of labels, whose theoretical

character was invisible to me until I was jolted by a detail I had failed to anticipate. My words could hardly have been more abstract if I had started from theology or Biblical history.

Just as I could say, "That's a heart, that's a lung," we go through life, saying, "I must be in love," "Oh, this is seasickness," "This is an orgasm," "This is a midlife crisis." We are ready with culturally constructed labels long before we encounter the realities, even to the point of saying, "This is a heart attack," "I must be dying." We can call our fate by name before we meet it. It will not retreat, but we are often relieved when doctors name our conditions.

The facts of the body both separate and connect. They testify to the links between human beings and other mammals and living systems, but they divide the sexes and the developmental stages. The body's truths are often concealed, so it is not always easy to learn about birth or sex or death, or the curious and paradoxical relationships between them. We keep them separate and learn about them on different tracks, just as we learn separately about economics and medicine and art, and only peripheral vision brings them back together. Experience is structured in advance by stereotypes and idealizations, blurred by caricatures and diagrams.

In the past, we might have climbed as children onto a big four-poster used in turn for birthing, lovemaking, and dying. In other cultures we might have grown up seeing human bodies of every age: torsos as distinctive as faces; breasts of many forms and stages, from the barely budding to the flat, long breasts of multiple lactations; penises as varied as noses. Living in a palm and bamboo

hut or under a roof without surrounding walls, we would have listened at night to the sounds people make when their bodies are busy with the primordial efforts of pain or pleasure. We might have seen the interiors of human bodies as well, in places where custom demands the dismemberment of the newly dead. In the modern West, however, even intimacy is categorized and filtered through abstractions.

Anthropologists are trained to be participants and observers at the same time, but the balance fluctuates. Sometimes a dissonance will break through and pull you into intense involvement in an experience you had distanced by thinking of yourself as coolly looking on. Or it may push you away when you have begun to feel truly a part of what is happening. I was in that garden as a learner, an outsider, and yet, because I was there as a parent, I was simultaneously a teacher, an authority. Trying to understand and remember what I saw, I was also trying to establish an interpretation that would be appropriate for Vanni, one that would increase her understanding of the living world and her place in it and also bring her closer to the Iranians she would be living among for several years. At least, I wanted to leave her unfrightened. Out of that tense multiplicity of vision came the possibility for insight.

That day in the Persian garden has come to represent for me a changed awareness of learning pervading other activities. Meeting as strangers, we join in common occasions, making up our multiple roles as we go along—young and old, male and female, teacher and parent and lover—with all of science and history present in

shadow form, partly illuminating and partly obscuring what is there to be learned. Mostly we are unaware of creating anything new, yet both perception and action are necessarily creative. Much of modern life is organized to avoid the awareness of the fine threads of novelty connecting learned behaviors with acknowledged spontaneity. We are largely unaware of speaking, as we all do, sentences never spoken before, unaware of choreographing the acts of dressing and sitting and entering a room as depictions of self, of resculpting memory into an appropriate past.

This awareness is newly necessary today. Men and women confronting change are never fully prepared for the demands of the moment, but they are strengthened to meet uncertainty if they can claim a history of improvisation and a habit of reflection. Sometimes the encounter takes place on journeys and distant sojourns, as it has for me in periods of living in Israel, the Philippines, and Iran. Often enough we encounter the strange on familiar territory, midway through familiar actions and commitments, as did the Iranian gardener whose cosmopolitan employers had become half foreign to him. Sometimes change is directly visible, but sometimes it is apparent only to peripheral vision, altering the meaning of the foreground.

What I tried to do that day, stringing together elements of previous knowledge, attending to catch every possible cue, and exploring different translations of the familiar, was to improvise responsibly and with love. Newly arrived in Iran, I had no way of knowing what was going to happen, not even a clear sense of my

own ignorance. Even so, I was trying to put together a way of acting toward my child and my hosts that would allow all of us, in courtesy and goodwill, to sustain a joint performance.

Vanni of course was generating a novel performance too, trying to figure out who to be and how to react, the complex perennial task of childhood. She got some of her cues from me, but she also kept a watchful eye on the children of the gardener: the oldest, who watched as he had many times before, with a sense of occasion and none of horror, and the younger ones gleaning the confidence that this was an ordinary, unfrightening process taking place in front of them, but a solemn and even festive moment as well, one that would be repeated and explored in play.

So there we were, nine people differing in at least four dimensions: adults and children, females and males, Iranians and Americans, affluent urbanites and villagers, with differences of language and religion falling along the same cleavages. We were joined in the performance of a ritual, in spite of the fact that we did not share a common script or common doctrines. What was happening had different meanings to each of us. The contrasts were as great between the sophisticated urban people and the villagers, who were all nominally Muslims and Iranians, as between the American outsiders and our hosts. Men and women, nominally sharing the same culture, must bridge comparable gaps, yet for better or worse they have always done so, for all human beings live with strangers.

Occasions like this encounter in a winter garden provide the

frameworks for future learning. Both on the scene and in memory, similarities are tasted and compared. Vanni was learning something about my stance that would affect her play with neighbor children in the alley behind our house. By now she has forgotten that day, but she would have remembered it over the next few months, and other experiences would have been matched with it and sorted out in her learning. She was going through the process of immersion in a second culture early in her learning of a first and having to adapt not only to what adults can explain but also to things for which they have no words. Children cope superbly where anthropologists must grope. I believe that participant observation is more than a research methodology. It is a way of being, especially suited to a world of change. A society of many traditions and cultures can be a school of life. Even as a two-year-old in that scene, Vanni had to improvise not one but multiple roles.

The quality of improvisation characterizes more and more lives today, lived in uncertainty, full of the inklings of alternatives. In a rapidly changing and interdependent world, single models are less likely to be viable and plans more likely to go awry. The effort to combine multiple models risks the disasters of conflict and runaway misunderstanding, but the effort to adhere blindly to some traditional model for a life risks disaster not only for the person who follows it but for the entire system in which he or she is embedded, indeed for all the other living systems with which that life is linked.

Adaptation comes out of encounters with novelty that may

seem chaotic. In trying to adapt, we may need to deviate from cherished values, behaving in ways we have barely glimpsed, seizing on fragmentary clues. The improvisatory artist cannot be sure whether a given improvisation will stand as a work of art or be rejected as an aberration. Trusted habits of attention and perception may be acting as blinders. Resources we have relied on to shape our lives may turn out to be dangerous addictions or spin into new shapes as the earliest versions of emerging patterns. Essential themes are not clearly marked but rather visible only out of the corner of the eye.

Under the pressure of the moment, needing to respond, it is easy to be captured by some central point of focus. A dead sheep. The spilling of blood and its impact on a small child. But there is always more in any episode, much of it at the very edge of awareness, most of it in flux, the relationships within any cultural tradition between old and new barely visible.

This same ambiguity sets new tasks for parents and teachers. Instead of passing on hallowed certainties and maintaining the status quo, they must make childhood an open-ended introduction to a process of continual change in which self-observation can become the best of teachers. If we knew the future of a particular child, we might be able to prepare that child with all the necessary skills and attitudes, and we might say at a given moment that the preparation is completed and it is time for real life to commence. That situation, however, is long gone, if indeed it ever existed. Rarely is it possible to study all the instructions to a game before beginning to play, or to memorize the manual before turning on

the computer. The excitement of improvisation lies not only in the risk involved but in the new ideas, as heady as the adrenaline of performance, that seem to come from nowhere. When the necessary tasks of learning cannot be completed in a portion of the life cycle set aside for them, they have to join life's other tasks and be done concurrently. We can carry on the process of learning in everything we do, like a mother balancing her child on one hip as she goes about her work with the other hand or uses it to open the doors of the unknown. Living and learning, we become ambidextrous.

Systems of education are everywhere in ferment, visions of promise countered with proposals for increasing rigidity. The Japanese are as puzzled as the Americans—ostensibly for opposite reasons—and you can find editorials about the flaws of education systems from London to Manila. This suggests that many proposals have too narrow a focus, are directed at local problems when the entire concept of education needs to be rethought. Looking at the place of learning in other societies and times from this vantage point, it is reassuring to know that everywhere most of learning occurs outside the settings labeled as educational. Living and learning are everywhere founded on an improvisational base. The discovery of new needs may be followed by adding units to the syllabus, but it can also lead to the discovery of how human beings make do with partial understandings, invent themselves as they go along, and combine in complex undertakings without full agreement about what they are doing. These skills also are learned.

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