

How We Wear Water:  
Creative Learning for Sustainability

by

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## ABSTRACT

In this multi-media dissertation, water is used metaphorically to equate the process of learning with embracing change. Paradigm shifts needed for sustainability require transformative learning where one is open to being shaped by new knowledge and experience. Properties of water – such as molecular bonding and phase changes – uncover lessons for humans’ adaptability. Given that human bodies are comprised mostly of water – what implications exist for human capacity to similarly undergo continuous change? An arts-based research methodology is practiced to produce a four-chapter project. Artistic methods of data collection and communication retain subjective complexity of lived experiences central to learning processes. Each chapter is prepared for a target audience and addresses widening scales of creative learning for sustainability. Chapter one is a narrative ethnography that focuses on a personal creative process for sustainability learning. Chapter two is a co-authored journal that covers creative learning tools and design principles for sustainable classrooms. Chapter three is an open-access and adaptive, online toolkit that shares creative methods to cultivate curiosity and critical contemplation. Chapter four is an interactive showcase event that explores how water can inform and inspire individual and collective learning for sustainability. This four-chapter project addresses the power of creative learning for sustainability at the personal, familial, formal classroom, informal online learning community, and public scales. Arts-based methods harness aesthetic power, welcome subjective complexity, and allow multiple meanings to be interpreted from research results. This multi-media project stretches the conventional structure of sustainability dissertations. The bridge between the arts and sciences is strengthened as this project shows synergies between these two ways of knowing. This research invites what can be learned from the wisdom of water – to both change and be changed by circumstances.

## DEDICATION

I begin by offering this project as a dedication to my mother. Had you not hosted me in the ocean of your womb, I would not be where I am. Had you not finished your Ph.D. and embodied the spirit of eternal curiosity, I would not be where I am.

And to my father. You have proven to me that where there is a will, there is a way. Like water, you are a lifelong problem solver. You always find a path and help me find mine.

To my sister. Your persistent wit and fierce vision have carried me further than I ever imagined I could go. Thank you for reminding me that I need to be exactly where I am.

My beloved husband. You have been the moon that pulls my ocean's tides through the ups and downs. You have given me the space to meet my own strength. Wish you were here.

Baham. You have raised me into the courageous, confident, creative, and curious being I am.

Emily. You have shown the way to face the inescapable with the heart.

Jess. You have granted the gift of graceful grounding.

Nona. You have offered the wisdom of living with wonder.

Andie. You have carried the will of care-filled commitment.

To all the brilliant beings I've worked with through the SOS 322 course – thank you for entrusting me with your process. And thank you for being willing to dive into the deep end.

My ancestors – all who came before me – thank you for offering me your shoulders upon which I can stand. Your support launches me into terrain none of us knew was possible.

My future generations – all who come after me – thank you for entrusting me with the responsibility to support your vision. Your attention pulls me into this passionate path.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project would not be possible without the continued support of my generous committee. Thank you for granting me the freedom to undergo this productive exploration.

David – you lit the spark. Thank you for teaching me to have one foot in and one foot out. You have granted me the permission to create the reality I wish to live in.

Liz – you sustained the flame. Thank you for reminding me of my creative power. You have enabled me to unearth my own skills as a toolmaker for transformation.

Mary Margaret – you supplied the firewood. Thank you for supporting me continuously. You have introduced me to a vast supply of knowledge to help frame my experiences.

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## PREFACE

In this multi-media dissertation, water is used metaphorically to equate the process of learning with embracing change. Paradigm shifts needed for sustainability require transformative learning where one is open to being shaped by new knowledge and experience. Properties of water – such as molecular bonding and phase changes –uncover lessons for humans’ adaptability. Given that our bodies are comprised mostly of water – what implications exist for our capacity to similarly undergo continuous change?

An arts-based research methodology is practiced to produce a four-chapter project. Artistic methods of data collection and communication retain subjective complexity of lived experiences central to learning processes. Each chapter is prepared for a target audience and addresses widening scales of creative learning for sustainability.

Chapter one is a narrative ethnography that examines the role women in my family play in sustaining life. This personal process allows creative exploration of my practice of sustainability – an awareness that I am an ancestor-in-the-making for future generations. Family recipes, stories, and photos are compiled into a creative non-fiction piece designed to preserve and pass on folk knowledge. Chapter one is like a pond that addresses a personal and familial scale of creative learning for sustainability.

Chapter two is a co-authored journal article that covers creative learning tools and design

principles for sustainable classrooms. “Sustainable classrooms” are described as spaces that are alive, adaptive, and open to innovation. Three years of facilitation experience for a 300-level class on “International Development and Sustainability” are combined with data from student journals and interviews. Design principles of humanity, horizontality, and compassionate facilitation are found to be critical in supporting sustainable learning opportunities. Chapter two is like a lake that invites wider audiences to examine creative learning for sustainability, but focuses on case-specific material within a formal learning environment.

Chapter three is an open-access and adaptive, online toolkit sharing creative methods to cultivate curiosity and critical contemplation. The toolkit is accessible here through the following web-page. <https://creativesustainabilityeducation.wordpress.com/>

Many of these tools emerge within the context of sustainability education. However, the application of these tools extends to wider audiences interested in both formal and informal learning situations. Chapter three is like a river that supports a flow of tools for continuous experimentation.

Chapter four synthesizes the previous three chapters into a showcase exploring how water can inform and inspire individual and collective learning for sustainability. Interactive exhibits and performances examine lessons humans can learn from water’s adaptability. Chapter four is like a sea that invites a larger audience into the exploration of how creative learning encourages us to embrace change. The showcase was held on Tuesday March 17th 2020 at Daley Park in Tempe, AZ.

This four-chapter project addresses the power of creative learning for sustainability at the personal, familial, formal classroom, informal online learning community, and public scales. Arts-based methods harness aesthetic power, welcome subjective complexity, and allow multiple meanings to be interpreted from research results. This multi-media project stretches the conventional structure of sustainability dissertations. The bridge between the arts and sciences is strengthened as this project shows synergies between these two ways of knowing. We can learn from the wisdom of water – to both change and be changed by our circumstances.

## OVERVIEW

Chapter one is a narrative ethnography that examines the role women in my family play in sustaining life. This personal process allows creative exploration of my practice of sustainability – an awareness that I am an ancestor-in-the-making for future generations. Family recipes, stories, and photos are compiled into a creative non-fiction piece designed to preserve and pass on folk knowledge.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONSs

Q1: Which women in my lineage have been central to my understanding of womanhood?

Q2: What are key lessons I have gained from each woman?

Q3: As I re-cook family recipes, what can I learn about myself, my ancestors, and life as a whole?

Q4: With awareness of my family's past, what do I choose to inherit and pass on for the future?

## INTENDED AUDIENCE

This piece is written first and foremost for myself. *The making of a shirzan – lioness* allows me to preserve a personal creative practice while I facilitate learning for others. I explore a deep-seated connection to my family – those alive in the present, the past, and the future. This piece has already been shared with members of my family. I intend to continue spreading the piece with family, friends, and interested audiences. Each time a story is re-read and a recipe

is re-cooked, the ancient wisdom stored within them become re-animated and re-interpreted for the modern context.

## METHODS USED

This creative non-fiction piece draws primarily from the method of narrative ethnography. Narrative ethnography incorporates my experiences as a researcher within ethnographic descriptions of others' experiences.<sup>1</sup> I navigate between sharing my own experiences of these women and a re-telling of their stories.<sup>2</sup> Narrative ethnography allows me as a researcher to embrace the richness of the temporality, sociality, and place in which these stories emerge.<sup>3</sup>

I also harness the method of autoethnography which encourages researchers to turn lived experiences into data to gain focused insight on cultural phenomenon.<sup>4</sup> The particular cultural phenomenon I unearth is my understanding of womanhood. I draw from the rich histories of seven women in my immediate and distant lineage to unearth the roots of how my perception of womanhood has been shaped. I use family recipes and stories as a gateway to understand one key lesson each woman has to offer. The kitchen becomes a space to value cooking as a legitimate and central way of understanding and relating with life.

This piece is situated within an arts-based research methodology which values the wisdom that can be drawn through multiple ways of knowing and being.<sup>5</sup> For this narrative

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<sup>1</sup> Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: an overview. *Historical social research/Historische sozialforschung*, 273-290.

<sup>2</sup> Ellis et al. (2011)

<sup>3</sup> Clandinin, D.J. & Huber, J. (2010). Narrative Inquiry. *International Encyclopedia of Education (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.)*.

<sup>4</sup> Hokkanen, S. (2017). Analyzing personal embodied experiences: Autoethnography, feelings, and fieldwork. *Translation & Interpreting*, 9(1), 24-35.

<sup>5</sup> Leavy, P. (2015). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice*. Guilford Publications.

ethnography, I have engaged in the following: journaling, letter-writing, poetic inquiry, extended stays in Iran, cooking family recipes, family lineage research, subsistence farming in Iran, examining family photos<sup>6</sup>, conversing with family members, and carpet weaving in a local workshop in Iran.

## PROLOGUE

the making of this narrative ethnography

### INGREDIENTS:

*journaling*

*letter-writing*

*poetic inquiry*

*lengthy stays in Iran*

*cooking family recipes*

*family lineage research*

*subsistence farming in Iran*

*examining old family photos*

*conversing with family members*

*carpet weaving in a local workshop in Iran*

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<sup>6</sup> Sandbye, M. (2014). Looking at the family photo album: a resumed theoretical discussion of why and how. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 6(1), 254-19.

What you are about to read is a hefty meal I've prepared with ingredients sourced from local lived experiences, organic lineages, and pasture-raised people. I will admit that it does have preservatives. I know no other way of keeping my family's stories alive.

This piece would not be possible without the research methods of autoethnography and narrative ethnography. Autoethnography encourages researchers to turn lived experiences into data in order to gain insight on cultural phenomenon.<sup>7</sup> Autoethnographic methods allow me to unpack the intricacies of my lived experiences as the daughter of Iranian immigrants, an Iranian-American woman who has married an Iranian man, and an aspiring mother | grandmother | great-grandmother sustaining life for future generations. An autoethnographic focus calls me to unearth roots supporting my understanding of womanhood.<sup>8</sup>

Simultaneously, I recognize that my existence is just one fleeting moment on this ancient spectrum of time. So I go back. I trace stories of significant women in my lineage using narrative ethnography. I navigate between sharing my own experiences of these women and a re-telling of their stories.<sup>9</sup> Narrative ethnography allows me as a researcher to embrace the richness of the temporality, sociality, and place in which these stories emerge.<sup>10</sup> I welcome the change that comes through the continual process of living, telling, retelling, and reliving

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<sup>7</sup> Hokkanen, S. (2017). Analyzing personal embodied experiences: Autoethnography, feelings, and fieldwork. *Translation & Interpreting*, 9(1), 24-35.

<sup>8</sup> I thank Dr. De La Garza for introducing me into the world of autoethnography. I have been inspired by her work, in particular, *Maria speaks*. De La Garza, S. A. (2004). *Maria speaks: Journeys into the mysteries of the mother in my life as a Chicana*. New York, New York: Peter Lang.

<sup>9</sup> Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: an overview. *Historical social research/Historische sozialforschung*, 273-290.

<sup>10</sup> Clandinin, D.J. & Huber, J. (2010). Narrative Inquiry. *International Encyclopedia of Education (3<sup>rd</sup> Ed.)*.

these stories. I re-cook their family recipes as I re-gain wisdom from cooking as a way of knowing. The kitchen becomes a space to understand and relate with life with sustainability in mind.

I dive deep into my lineage in preparation of becoming someone's ancestor someday. Within the field of Sustainability, we work to embrace the needs that span across generations. This narrative ethnography is my practice of becoming more conscious of stories that imprint my identity as an Iranian woman. I become conscious of historical stories to make careful choices of what stories I wish to carry from this present into the future.

I study some of the key female figures who have brought me to where I am. I digest their stories. I preserve their family recipes. I cradle their legacy that leads me to this moment. I unearth cultural patterning pressed into these Iranian women from different ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. I filter to find the wisdom each woman embodies. I choose what lessons to hold onto. I move forward with conscious care as I continue living as a daughter, a sister, a wife, a facilitator of creative learning, and as an aspiring mother.

< *why women?* >

On December 6<sup>th</sup> 1992, in Silver Spring, Maryland, United States of America, I was born into this world as a woman. I did not realize it then, but my biological gender and the cultural norms associated with womanhood, would greatly shape my experience with this Earth.



Through my Master's research, I uncovered the fields of Ecofeminism and Feminist Political Ecology. These schools of thought invite us to view environmental challenges with the intersectional lens of gender as well as factors like race, class, and geographic location.<sup>11</sup> Researching linkages between gender and sustainability has offered examples of how women can have heightened connections with the Earth.<sup>12</sup>

Women have historically played the role of the caretaker and the nurturer. Like the Earth, we host life. We sustain the creation of children and birth them into existence. By virtue of adopting responsibilities like collecting water, subsistence farming, caring for livestock, cooking, and cleaning – women can have a visceral reality that is delicately intertwined with natural surroundings. Depending on how they sustain their lifestyles, men too can of course be similarly woven with this connection.

I choose to focus on stories of women since they are often kept veiled behind a curtain that is rarely pulled back. By virtue of being a woman myself, I have been granted access to this rich world of work that keeps the world whirling.

By no means do I underestimate the role that husbands, fathers, brothers, grandfathers, uncles, and cousins play to support a family. These men are too honored within the chapters that follow as I re-tell the stories of significant women from my lineage.

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<sup>11</sup> Plumwood, V. (1986). Ecofeminism: An overview and discussion of positions and arguments. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 64(sup1), 120-138.

Rocheleau D., Thomas-Slayter B., Wangari E. (1996). *Feminist Political Ecology: Global Issues and Local Experiences*. Routledge: New York, 3 -26.

<sup>12</sup> Cruz-Torres, M. & McElwee, P. (2012). Introduction. In *Gender and Sustainability* (1-21). The University of Arizona Press.

As I uncover the stories of women who came before me, I discover their heightened focus on sustaining their families – sustaining their meals, their wealth, their futures, and their hope.

< *why this topic?* >

It took me quite some time to decide the focus for the personal chapter of my dissertation. My larger Ph.D. project discovers how creative learning can support sustainability education.

I knew a chapter of my dissertation needed to embrace my subjective dimension. I am keenly aware that I bring my subjective experience into any space I am a part of. I became far more sensitive to the role of my subjectivity once I was granted the power to facilitate spaces for learning. I began inheriting responsibility for the learning processes of other beings. And I could not take this responsibility lightly.

Autoethnography called me to use my lived experiences to make cultural commentary.

I could explore how I've inherited colonial mentalities imprinted into the Iranian people.

I could discover wisdom my body carries through disciplined movement practices.

I could learn lessons from the liminal space between my Iranian and American identities.

I could investigate my relationship with creativity and past experiences with the arts.

I could...

Each one of these threads has wisdom. I was hesitant to pick one since I did not want to limit myself. I wanted to choose a topic so expansive that it would allow me to fit everything in it.

So I settled on the topic of “how creativity affects my evolution.” It sounded nice. It could include just about everything I was interested in.

On the surface it seemed perfect. But deep down, I knew it was too big of an ocean for me to survive in. I would likely drown.

After a productive conversation with my two co-chairs, I knew I needed to go back to the drawing board. I made mind maps, thinking grids, free-wrote, doodled, composed letters to my research...

I spent hours swimming through my own mind. I came up with the following words that I knew were important: education – migration – women – ancestry

I knew I was onto something but it still felt far too far away.

That evening, my parents came home from spending time with their friend who is a Persian classical musician. They had insisted I join them, but I declined. I needed time to cocoon with my project. Upon returning, the silver in their hair was sparkling with excitement. They started spilling stories about this new project their friend is a part of. Their excitement was contagious. But the inspiration came with hints of envy. Why couldn't I find one topic to

stick too with such devotion?

In Persian they say one should avoid quickly jumping from one branch to the other. I feel like my entire research trajectory has been jumping between branches.

Being the observant and intuitive woman that she is, my mother quickly began inquiring about my process. How was my evening? Was I able to come to any conclusions?

I had a captive audience –the undivided attention of the beings who had brought me into this world and raised me. It was a safe space to spill out my soul.

I rambled and sighed, I jittered and cried. I knew I was close, but still felt lost.

My dad's gaze was pierced to the wall, which meant he was listening attentively.

*Tell the story of the women who have sacrificed themselves to bring us all to this moment.*

I was sold. For some time, I had felt a pulsating connection to my ancestors.

I embarked on building our family tree, re-tracing the roots of our relations.

I placed photos of my grandparents and grandparents-in-law on the wall, seeking their support. I practiced letter-writing to my late ancestors, communicating through time travel.

I enriched my cooking with family secrets, finding comfort by way of the gut.

< *why this structure?* >

My overall Ph.D. project adopts an arts-based research approach.<sup>13</sup> Arts-based research invites researchers to tap into art as a unique way of knowing and being in the world. Research projects can embrace emergence and become open to surprise dormant within creative processes. After the focus of the piece primarily became the stories of others, I realized this piece is more of a narrative ethnography. Narrative ethnography incorporate the researcher's experiences within ethnographic descriptions of others' experiences.<sup>14</sup>

For this narrative ethnography, I harness autoethnographic methods, creative non-fiction writing, and family photos. Creative writing is a tool that allows me to breathe life into stories from family's past as I bind their relevance within my academic training today. Family photographs allow for social and emotional communication that transcends time and place.<sup>15</sup>

I use a structure greatly inspired by Laura Esquivel's novel "Like Water for Chocolate." Each chapter is organized by month and begins with a recipe. Cooking instructions become an entry point to continue telling the bittersweet tale of Tita, the protagonist.

Thanks to my sister, I recently re-read this novel with my husband and have relished in the way cooking creates the stories. My senses have been seasoned with appreciation for the

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<sup>13</sup> Leavy, P. (2015). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice*. Guilford Publications.

<sup>14</sup> Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: an overview. *Historical social research/Historische sozialforschung*, 273-290.

<sup>15</sup> Sandbye, M. (2014). Looking at the family photo album: a resumed theoretical discussion of why and how. *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture*, 6(1), 254-19.

magic happening in the kitchen.

It also just so happens that at this point in my life, in my final year of the Ph.D. program, I've also been cooking. A lot.

< *what has my recent positionality been?* >

As we say in Persian, I've become a “woman who runs a home” – *zane kbane dar*. Normally, in Persian culture, when a couple gets married, they begin to live under one roof. I've been married since December 2017, but my husband and I have mostly been living under different roofs, in different countries. Our distance has been caused by two main factors.

The first being that, before my husband and I met, I had committed to pursuing a Ph.D in Sustainability. I decided that gaining a Doctoral degree could support my life-goals of nurturing healthy curiosity and cross-cultural connection. For the first two years of the Ph.D. program, my physical presence on campus in Tempe, Arizona, United States was required.

The second factor causing our distance is that my husband has yet to be granted entry in the United States. Executive order 13769 (commonly known as the “travel ban”) implemented by the Trump administration in January 2017, has dramatically altered the immigration process for citizens from Muslim countries.<sup>16</sup> My husband was born and raised in Iran,

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<sup>16</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/executive-order-protecting-nation-foreign-terrorist-entry-united-states-2/>

which has been an Islamic Republic since 1979. Given his nationality, the processing of his visa has been sluggish, despite me being a U.S. born citizen.

Thankfully, I've been able to travel between the United States and Iran without difficulty. Since I've started the Ph.D. program, my visits to Iran to spend time with my husband and his family have been between 10 days to 2 months. During this final year of the program, I had finished my coursework and was granted the opportunity to fulfill my Teaching Associateship by facilitating an online course. This allowed me to spend an extended period of time in Iran.

From June 2019 to December 2019<sup>17</sup>, my husband and I lived with his grandmother in her home in the village of Kaleno, situated in the town of Kelardasht, hosted in the province of Mazandaran, within Central Northern borders of the country of Iran.

It just so happens that my father comes from this same town. But he grew up in the neighboring village of Lahoo. The walnut and hazelnut trees his parents planted continue to bear fruit to date.

Experiencing life in Kelardasht offers me a deep spoon from which I can slurp from the soup sourcing my paternal lineage. I learn the Kurdish dialect spoken by my father's family and husband's side. I cook cultural dishes using tips from local women. I hear stories about "the good old days" from withering elders. I weave a Kelardashti style carpet, similar to one

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<sup>17</sup> With the exception of August 2019 when I spent a month with my family in Maryland.

my paternal grandmother wove for me, but was stolen from my parent's home when I was just a baby. My current circumstances grant me disproportionate access to understanding the paternal side of my lineage.

My mother comes from a different part of Iran. She grew up in the town of Shahreza, within the province of Esfahan, situated in the Central portion of the country. I visited her hometown years ago. But since most of my mother's family is living outside of Iran, I have yet to experience daily life in Shahreza. Fortunately, I was able to grow up as neighbors with the families of my mom's sister and two of their brothers. Five of their other brothers live within a 30-minute radius. We gather on a monthly basis, using birthdays, graduations, memorials, engagements as excuses to reunite. While being raised in the United States, my maternal family provided me with a bubble of insight into my Iranian heritage.

*< what has my ethical positionality been? >*

Being situated in Iran has granted me access into the deep soil I am rooted in. I practice wearing lenses that clarify the complexity of context. As I digest stories from the past, I do my best to absorb them with an awareness of the past. Once I hear history through with ears from the past, I can then add in modern echoes.

I study my family's stories to unpack the culture in which I'm conditioned with. Throughout this practice, I ask myself what I want to hold onto and what I want to let go of as I begin my own family. I ask myself how I make these decisions. I attempt to develop tools for sifting through traditional ways of knowing with discernment.



I am grateful for the space this narrative ethnography provides me to engage in a process and create a product will stay alive in my family's legacy throughout the generations.

As I hear these stories, I bask in the powers that have helped us sustain ourselves.

As I digest these stories, I process wounds that are dragged through intergenerational trauma. As I write these stories, I find fractals of the elements I am made up of.

As I share these stories, I offer occasions to connect with the wisdom of women who persist.

Thank you for considering these stories worthy of your attention.

## INTRODUCTION

The making of a *shirzan* – a lioness.

*Shirzan* - Lioness

شیرزن

Ingredients:

*a sturdy back*

*a faithful heart*

*strong forearms*

*a fierce gaze*

*thick skin & a soft touch*  
*the capacity to hold space for one's past, present & future*  
*dedication, devotion, diligence*  
*discernment for who is worthy of mingling with the family*  
*the knowledge of when to stay silent & when to speak firmly*  
*an ability to let go without hesitation*  
*the capacity to run without looking back*  
*fierceness – independence – unconditional love*  
*guarding the future – patience – holding space – expressiveness*

The making of a *shirzan* – a lioness.

In Iran, a strong woman is called a *shirzan*, a lioness. A *shirzan* is both soft and fierce. She whimpers and roars. She knows when her children should be cradled and when they should be tossed aside. She fills the bellies of others before filling her own. She maintains a piercing gaze when scanning all who lurk around her family. She hunts from the past to conserve for the future. She is swift. She leans on others but relies on no one. She finds faith in stars shining in dark times. She sustains.

I come from a long line of *shirzan* women. I am the fruit of the effort of these *shirzan* and their partners. In America, they say the apple does not fall too far from the apple tree. I ask, how did this tree come to produce such an apple?

To study where the apple got its tart-sweet taste - we must climb up its trunk, follow the veins on its leaves, and trace the roots steering through the soil. We must meet the water and weather from which it blossomed. We must peer into the Sun, Moon, and Stars who gifted it with light each day and each night. We must understand what gifted this apple its life.

The structure of this narrative ethnography allows me to do just this. I climb up the branches of my family tree, follow the veins of my ancestor's stories, and trace our shared roots. I am meeting the environment that my father was raised in through my extended time in his homeland of Kelardasht, Iran. I am attempting to understand what is gifting me life.

When I think about this life I've been gifted, my mother fills my mind. She hosted me in the ocean of her womb and rode the wave of birth to bring me into this world. My mother is one of the *shirzan* who has put herself second to sustain our family's needs. My mother could not have created me without the help of my father. My father is one of the *javan-mard*, gentlemen, who has tirelessly supported our family. I honor and shed light on the role that men have played in sustaining our family's multi-dimensional needs in the following chapters.

For the purposes of this piece, I choose to focus on the women - the *shirzan* - the lionesses who have woven bedspreads, cooked countless meals, worked long nights in the lab, and tended gardens to sustain our families. I choose to focus on these women since I am next in line to becoming a *shirzan*.

I know I'm on my way there since I've been called a *palang*, a leopard, when I'm doing housework or yardwork. I think it's mostly because I work quickly. I've also been called a *kad-banoo*, or a head lady, after someone sees the carpet I'm weaving or tastes a meal I've prepared. What differentiates a *kad-banoo* from a *shirzan*, is that a *shirzan* can do all the work a *kad-banoo* does, plus more. A *shirzan* is a "man for herself" as they say in Iran. She is both a woman and a man. Perhaps she is what Americans call a "superwoman."

I see myself as having some advantages and some disadvantages to becoming a *shirzan* since I grew up in the United States. I have advantages since I know I can do just about anything I put my heart into. The cultural atmospheres in which I played sports, attended school, shopped, and worked, offered me courage and the knowledge of my worth. I was not required to avert eye contact or heavily clothe my body in public to fit in with the norm. I competed against boys in dodgeball matches and worked alongside them in group projects. As a girl, I knew I was different from boys, but I never thought I was worth any less.

I have some disadvantages to becoming a *shirzan* because of the way individualism, liberal feminism, and class elitism have influenced mainstream culture in the United States. Individuals should rely on themselves and limit their dependence on collective structures. Stay-at-home mothers are often pitied, being seen as wasting their youth. A formally educated person performing physical labour is considered inappropriate.

I am beginning to understand the differences between the cultural atmospheres of the United States and Iran. Gender roles look starkly different in Iran and in the United States. Gender roles in Iran did not always look the way they do today.

To understand how gender norms in Iran have been shaped, we must take a brief dip into history. Every country has a complicated history that deserves to be understood with detail.

Please forgive me as I attempt to offer a succinct account of historical context for Iran. I skate through relevant events that have impacted gender equality in Iran. And of course, this is just one perspective on Iran's history. I do my best to gather information from various sources, yet I recognize that no historical account is ever complete.

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Modern day Iran houses one of the world's oldest civilizations, with records of settlements 100,000 years ago.<sup>18</sup> Various nomadic peoples began to form the nation which came to be known as Persia. In 550 BC, Cyrus the Great solidified Persia's presence as the first global empire. He gained the title as "King of Kings" when overthrowing neighboring empires to expand his terrain. Reigning over an expansive geographic territory, Cyrus the Great respected religious and cultural diversity to preserve the nation's centralized power. The language etched into the Cylinder he left behind is said to be the world's first declaration of human rights.<sup>19</sup>

Cyrus the Great's successors attempted to maintain the large territory they inherited. But neighboring powers such as the Greeks and Romans chiseled away at Persia. In these pre-

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<sup>18</sup> <sup>18</sup> <https://www.ancient.eu/Persia/>

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.humanrights.com/what-are-human-rights/brief-history/>

Islamic empires, women were able to take throne, participate in political councils, perform skilled labor and fight in battles alongside men.<sup>20</sup>

At the time, most Persians were Zoroastrian. Zoroastrians are known for following the threefold path of: Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds. Zoroastrians respected women as equals. Passages in the Avesta, a compilation of Zoroastrian religious texts, state that women can be rulers, participate and lead spiritual ceremonies, own and manage property, and choose their own spouses wisely.<sup>21</sup>

One of the most dramatic turns in ancient Iran's history occurred about 1,400 years ago with the conquest by Arab Muslims. Border towns were invaded, ancient texts were burned, women were raped, and land was stolen. After spurs of bloody rebellions, Muslim rule prevailed.

Arab Islamic rule altered the perception of women in Persia. Fundamentalist Arabs were known for limiting women's rights. Stories are re-told of some Arabs burying their daughters alive from disappointment of not being given a son.<sup>22</sup> Inevitably, fundamentalist interpretations of Islam permeated throughout Persia and shaped the way women were viewed. Non-Muslims were harassed and persecuted which led to the eventual spreading of the religion throughout the region. Drop by drop, women lost their equality to men.

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/women-i>

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/Women\\_s\\_Rights\\_in\\_Ancient\\_Persia.htm](http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/Women_s_Rights_in_Ancient_Persia.htm)

<sup>22</sup> [https://www.pbs.org/muhammad/ma\\_women.shtml](https://www.pbs.org/muhammad/ma_women.shtml)

After the Arab conquest of Persia, numerous empires held power, including a brief appearance by the Mongols. During these centuries, Persians did their best to retain ancient arts and sciences along with their personal beliefs. Iran was an outlier in comparison to other Middle Eastern countries which experienced Arab conquest. Persians were able to maintain a relatively strong grip on their ancient culture. Commenting on this phenomenon, Bernard Lewis, a British-American historian who specialized in Oriental Studies, affirms that “Iran was indeed Islamized, but it was not Arabized. Persians remained Persians.”<sup>23</sup>

Over time, Shi’a Islam strengthened its roots in Iranian soil.<sup>24</sup> Generation after generation, the Persian people’s relationship with Islam underwent a metamorphosis. For some, what began as a respect out of fear, turned into tolerance, evolved into skeptical belief, and became complete faith. This cycle of faith still spins as Iranians today negotiate their relationship with Islam.

After the Arab conquest of Persia, the next wave of Islam came with the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Prior to the revolution, the Pahlavi family was in power. The Pahlavi dynasty introduced a series of laws concerning women’s rights. As a step to affirm Western industrialization, Reza Shah banned all forms of veiling for women in 1936.<sup>25</sup> Given the historical role of headscarves in Persian culture, compulsory un-veiling was contentious and seen as a move of deculturalization. Headscarves, modest clothing, and decorative veiling

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<sup>23</sup> Lewis, B. 2001. Iran in History.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20070429144545/http://www.tau.ac.il/dayancenter/mel/lewis.html>

<sup>24</sup> I recognize that I am not differentiating between Sunni and Shia interpretations of Islam. For the purposes of this piece, I do not have the space to go into the rich details of difference.

<sup>25</sup> <https://www.news.com/stories/in-iran-the-hijab-has-its-roots-in-protest-not-conformity/>

have been part of Persian traditional dress for women for thousands of years.<sup>26</sup> Veiling was once even a symbol of royalty for Persian women.<sup>27</sup> However, the full body-length cloak and covering of the face comes from Arab culture.

Reza Shah's son, Mohammad Reza Shah, took power in 1941 and was adamant to keep up with Western modernization. Roads were built, literacy was promoted, and oil royalties supported the economy. Nonetheless, Iran's Industrialization had shadow sides. Oil royalties were in the hands of the British. The U.S. backed a coup against the beloved Prime Minister Mossadegh who attempted to nationalize oil in 1951.<sup>28</sup> Iranian people were left wondering who was really determining the fate of their country.

The Shah granted women the right to vote in 1963 and women began taking seats in parliament the following year.<sup>29</sup> Islamic leadership was troubled by the Shah's "White Revolution."<sup>30</sup> Conservative Muslims joined in loose alliances with Leftist, anti-Western youth to overthrow the Shah in 1979.

After a few months of temporary military governance, Iran officially became an Islamic Republic. Some were pleased and some were disappointed. Ayatollah Khomeini emerged as the Supreme Leader willed by Allah, and assured the populous that he was the voice balancing reason and faith.

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<sup>26</sup>[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280641146\\_Bearers\\_of\\_Culture\\_Images\\_of\\_Veiling\\_in\\_Ma\\_rjane\\_Satrapi's\\_Persepolis](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/280641146_Bearers_of_Culture_Images_of_Veiling_in_Ma_rjane_Satrapi's_Persepolis)

<sup>27</sup> [https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=7880&context=etd\\_theses](https://scholarworks.sjsu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=7880&context=etd_theses)

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2019/01/31/690363402/how-the-cia-overthrew-irans-democracy-in-four-days>

<sup>29</sup> <https://intpolicydigest.org/2019/02/22/before-and-after-iran-1979/>

<sup>30</sup> <https://www.britannica.com/topic/White-Revolution>



Women's rights dramatically altered as the government transformed the Iranian legal structure to follow Islamic Sharia law, outlined in the Quran. The legal marrying age for a woman was lowered to nine, the hijab was mandated, public transportation was segregated by sex, a women's legal testimony became half of a man's, women lost access to family planning, and nurseries were closed being deemed as a Western conspiracy to deprive children of motherly love and Islamic values.<sup>31</sup>

Post-revolution life was stringent for all, but a disproportionate burden was placed on women. The Islamic government tied a tight knot around private and public life. Over time, this knot has loosened. Today, over 40 years since the Islamic Republic was established, the government has been unable to maintain such a tight grip. Islamic laws are still firmly inscribed and enforced. Nonetheless, Iran continues to evolve with the ever-changing needs of the people. Initially, women were required to wear dark, long coverings. But today, liberal women roam the streets with colorful overcoats and headscarves that barely hide their figures.

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I trust that this brief historical overview of Iran offers a backdrop for the stories I'll be sharing in the chapters to follow. I find that understanding my people's history is an important part of my practice of becoming a good ancestor for future generations.

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<sup>31</sup> <https://intpolicydigest.org/2019/02/22/before-and-after-iran-1979/>

Putting pre-Islamic and post-Islamic customs aside, women have historically been the primary caretakers of the children and home environments in Iran. Given the physical dependence of children drinking their mother's milk, women have been seen as better equipped to care for the young. Alongside raising children, women have been responsible for maintaining the home environment to offer order and sustenance for husbands coming home from working in the outside world.

In many Iranian families today, this remains the custom. This is more common in families living in rural environments. Families who live in the city often have higher living expenses and in some cases women are required to work outside the home to sustain their livelihoods. In some cases, women work publically because of pure interest. In some cases, women's husbands, or fathers, or brothers prevent them from working outside the home.

The ever-changing phenomenon of gender roles in Iranian families is complicated. I use the stories in the chapters to follow as a way to dive into the complexity of detail.

I choose to dedicate each chapter of this narrative ethnography to a significant woman in my life. I have chosen these women and these women have chosen me. I celebrate their stories as I bake them into recipes they have gifted me with. Each chapter features one woman, one recipe, and one lesson. These women's lessons flavor the recipes that these pages can keep alive.

Each *shirzan* has her own path. And each *shirzan* is connected through matter and culture.

The *shirzan* in the pages to follow share their connections with you through the matter of food and the culture of story.

Writing this piece feels like preparing a dinner party. The thrill of pleasing guests slips through my toes as I spend hours pivoting around the kitchen. Excitement fills my fingertips as I put the finishing garnishes on the dishes. Nonetheless, worry lingers in my lower-belly as I anticipate whether the meal will settle well with my audience's taste buds.

I do my best to provide an array of flavors in the chapters to follow. Now there is only one way to find out how it tastes to you – to dig in! Or as we say in Persian upon feasting, *noosbe jan*, may this nourish your being.

### **Akaber | Fierceness | Garlic Herb Stew**

Ingredients:

*3 bunches of garlic shoots*

*2 bunches each of chives, green onions, cilantro, parsley*

*1 bunch of mint*

*5 or so bulbs of garlic (or more of you wish)*

*1/3<sup>rd</sup> kilo lamb meat (if meat is desired)*

*1 small onion*

*2.5 kilos full fat yogurt from sheep or goat milk (if possible)*

*1 chicken egg*

*turmeric, salt & pepper to taste*

Preparation:

Before sharing the details of this dish with you, I offer a fair warning. If consumed for lunch, one must be prepared to cancel all afternoon plans. This dish is infamous for sending folks into mid-day slumbers of up to 4 hours. Garlic is known for lowering one's blood pressure. Yogurt is also known for lowering one's blood pressure. This dish has both. And a lot of both.

This garlic herb stew, or what we call *sang-e-seer* translates literally to “rock and garlic.” In the olden days, and still within some small cracks of Iran, the garlic is pounded and rolled into a paste using a rock upon a stone dish or wooden board. Slowly but surely, the garlic releases its odorous oils under the pressure of the rock. This practice originated in a time where our muscles were our main way of getting our desired results. Long before electricity could power the motor of a food processor to puree the garlic by pressing a button for seconds.

Akaber Teimornejad's fate was like the cloves of garlic pounded slowly by stone. She did not have the luck to be pureed in seconds. Her life pulled the energy from her, slowly but surely. She spilled her precious energy, slowly but surely. Until she had had enough. She pureed herself in seconds with a heart attack while working in the quiet of her own orchard. A quick death, just the way she had always wished.

During a heart attack, some people experience an increase in blood pressure, some experience a decrease in blood pressure, and some experience no change at all. I do not know what was the case for my Akaber, my Nana Jan. I do know that she ate a lot of garlic

and swore by its medicinal powers.

Akaber Teimornejad, who we called Nana Jan, was the mother of my father. Mentions of her name conjure stories of her strength, her fierceness, and her dedication. Her daily responsibilities rapidly calloused the skin surrounding her hands and carved wrinkles into her forehead. She cared for her plants so well that all the onions used during her funeral services for 40 days were from her own garden.

She was the head of the home. And the home did not just include the four walls of her family's house. The home extended to the children, the barn animals, the orchards, the wood-fire oven, and the garden. Nana Jan was famous for her garden. She worked with the land to provide her family with staples such as pearly white onions, potent purple-skinned garlic, lumpy squashes, and an assortment of invigorating herbs.

To prepare *Sang-e-Seer*, one must have patience from the very start. Gather the necessary herbs. If you are picking these from your garden like my Nana Jan did, pay careful attention to filter through for any lingering weeds or worse – slugs. It is recommended that you take the time to de-stem and search through for any yellowing leaves before washing. This saves you energy and water.

To wash the herbs, fill up the sink or a large basin with cold water with a spoonful of salt. Allow the herbs to soak for a bit. The cold water perks up the fragrant herbs by permeating their leaves. The salt cleans away any worry with its disinfecting properties. This is the first round of washing. Herbs must be washed diligently. With a spiraling motion, use your hands

to gather the herbs that are floating at the surface. Place these into a strainer while you empty the basin of any gritty water. Fill again with cold water, but this time the salt is not necessary. Allow the herbs to sit again. Depending on how dirty your herbs are, you may need to rinse and repeat quite a few times. It is better to err on the side of caution while washing herbs than have someone end up with a stone in their spoonful.

Once you feel assured that the herbs are clean, allow them to sit in the strainer for some time until most of their water has evaporated. If you are working quickly, you can pat them with a clean towel. Next, chop them finely. You can use your own muscles, a sharp knife, and a cutting board to help you accomplish this. Or you can take a short-cut and use a motor-operated food processor. The end result should be flakes about size of a pinky fingernail.

Next, sauté the herbs in an oil of your choice. Hover above the pan with a spatula in hand to avoid burning the herbs. The aroma of the herbs will begin to sway with the steam into your nostrils. If you get this signal, you are on the right track. Sprinkle in turmeric, salt, and pepper. Continue to toss the herbs from side to side with a spatula until their color has darkened. The herbs that started of a sprightly green have dimmed with the formula of heat over time.

My Nana Jan started off sprightly like those herbs. She grew up in the village of Kaleno alongside her two brothers and one sister. Kaleno is a place where one has no choice but to

be humbled by the transformation of Life. Spring offers a rich layer off soil, ready to be sown with seeds. Summer invites a beating Sun, pulling the children up into the fruit trees to devour sour cherries and plums. Autumn receives heart-wrenching rain, carrying kaleidoscopic leaves away from their branches. Winter welcomes cascading snow, promising a deep slumber.

Nana Jan's father allowed himself to be permeated by the wisdom of Nature. They call him Baba Yadollah, meaning the hand of God. He was a man animated with reverence for all forms of Life. He lived to be 107 years old and could thread a needle up until his last breaths. He supported his family through subsistence farming, planting what the land would let him. Their family worked hard and saw the fruits of their labor. They had 48 cows as well as sheep, goats, chickens, and ducks. Diligently caring for their farmland, their harvest was so abundant that they often found themselves with plenty to share.

Preparing wheat is not an easy task. Especially when using mules to power the operation. Upon harvest, the bushels are carefully tied and stacked in a cylindrical pyramid. One worker guides the mule in circles to tread on the bushels. This allows the seed heads to separate from the straw. Another worker is waiting on the sidelines to collect the straw. At the end of a full day's work, one is left with grain ready to be winnowed.

One evening in early Autumn, when the sky was darkening with threads of burnt orange and eggplant clouds, Baba Yadollah and his team were finishing off a long day of preparing wheat. As they were saddling up their mules and preparing to head home, Baba Yadollah left three cups full of wheat at their workstation.

*“What are you doing sir? After all this hard work, why are you leaving perfectly good wheat behind?”*

*“We have been blessed with this fertile soil and the willpower to work our way into receiving this wheat. We have more than enough for ourselves. I leave this behind as an offering to the quails, the squirrels, the ants, and whatever creatures that may travel here this evening.”*

The next morning, when they returned for another full day of work, not one seed was left.

Baba Yadollah cared for the needs of all. His slowly accumulated wealth allowed him to build the first two-storied house in the whole town. There were four bedrooms upstairs and four bedrooms downstairs. A balcony surrounded the house from side to side. This was much more than what his family needed. Downstairs was consistently occupied by seasonal workers, locals in need of support, and students who had migrated for their studies. Rent was never collected.

When a local woman became widowed, Baba Yadollah would give her some of his land.

Learn to work with the land to feed your family. This was his maxim.

Nana Jan’s father infused her with a thick sense of responsibility. As a young girl, she would help milk the cows, sift the wheat, wash the clothes, and tend the garden. At the ripe age of nine, suitors were lining up for her hand in marriage. She did not know what marriage was, but she could use a playmate. One afternoon, she was given a generous gift by one of her suitors. A suitcase full of sparkling fabric and decorative jewelry. He was a wealthy doctor



who lived in the capital. He could surely provide her a life of luxury.

But this doctor was not the only man in the running. There was another doctor competing for her hand in marriage. But this one was not rich. And he had no medical license.

He was Davood Movahed, the son of the only herbal doctor in the whole town. With their horse-drawn wagon, he traveled with his father throughout Kelardasht offering ointments and natural remedies to all who lingered in pain. Davood inherited his father's business at the age of nine when his father passed away. Shortly after, he was left orphaned when his mother died a few years later. He was poor, but persistent.

The first time he came for *khastegari*, to ask for my Nana Jan's hand in marriage, Baba Yadollah firmly declined. He saw into the version of the future if his daughter wedded this skinny, impoverished 13-year old. She would be surrounded with misfortune. Absolutely not.

Davood left swiftly, calculating what tools were needed to successfully perform this operation. A clever teenager, Davood sniffed out survival skills needed to succeed on his own. He went and spoke to the *Seyeds*, the spiritual leaders of their Yarsani faith tradition. He spilled the stories of his difficult childhood and carried them into the tales of his future dreams. With the right woman by his side, he could offer comprehensive medical attention to the whole village.

The second time he came for *kbastegari*, Davood brought along three of the *Seyeds*. As a team, they came to massage Baba Yadollah's mind into approving of this marriage. Baba Yadollah had no choice. As a man of faith who deeply respected the wishes of the *Seyeds*, he could not decline. He hesitatingly offered his approval.

The marriage was arranged. Nana Jan had no idea how the threads of her fate would be woven. One thing was certain, the gifts from the previous suitor needed to be done away with. Nana Jan's mother grabbed her daughter with one hand and the suitcase full of precious tokens of wealth in the other hand and they went to the wood-fire oven. Normally, this oven is used for baking traditional bread. This day, the oven would be used to burn a future with the wealthy doctor and any lingering "what if" thoughts my Nana Jan could have.

She was just a girl when she was sent off for marriage. A young lamb, just discovering the world, whose flesh has not yet been toughened by the bitter truths of Life.

The younger the lamb, the softer it's meat.

When preparing the meat for *Sang-e-Seer*, one must be aware of the age the sheep was when it was killed. If the sheep was older, its meat will take longer to cook. Chunks of lamb meat can be used from just about any part of the sheep's body. Except the brain, eyeballs, hooves, stomach, and intestines – those are specially reserved for other dishes.

First, in a separate pan, the meat is sautéed. Some sauté the meat on its own. And some

sauté the meat with chopped or grated onion. The folks who forbid the entry of onion swear by the purity of *Sang-e-Seer* as a garlic dish and a garlic dish only. I have learned from my Ame Iran, who just so happens to be Nana Jan's eldest daughter, that *khoreshte bi piyaz mesle aroose bi jahaz* – a stew without onion is like a bride without household necessities.<sup>32</sup> So I have come to join the group of people who sauté the lamb chunks with onion. But I am careful to grate the onion finely so that it is unnoticeable in the final dish.

In the case that the meat being used is from an older sheep, the meat must be cooked for quite some time separately. Once all sides of the meat are seared and begin to change color, water is added. Over medium heat, the meat is cooked until the water is evaporated. Continue adding water as needed. The meat is to be cooked until it is tender. The older the sheep, the longer this process takes.

In the case that the meat being used is from a young sheep, a lamb to be exact, the meat needs only to be sautéed swiftly before entering the stew.

My Nana Jan was married off as a lamb. Her supple skin was seared by the Sun as she worked tirelessly to support her new family.

They started off with just the two of them. Davood Movahed who came to be known as my Dada Jan and Nana Jan, who was now known as Mrs. Dr. Movahed. They were just kids

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<sup>32</sup> *Jahaz* is a term used to describe the appliances and furniture that a bride is responsible for bringing with her as a couple starts their life under one roof. This responsibility often falls on the shoulder of the bride's family and can become a testimony to their level of wealth.

themselves, finding their way through the world.

*“We were both still afraid to use the outhouse at night. We would take turns, carrying the lantern for each other.”*

Akaber would recount to her children how her and their father were playmates to begin with.

As soon as my Nana Jan could bear children at age 13, she had her first born – a daughter. She gave birth to nine children. Six of them lived past the age of six.

The first child she lost was a boy, named Ahmad. He was birthed during the brisk winds of Winter. Barely seeing his third year, he left this Earth riding relentless waves of illness.

The second child she lost was a girl, named Akhtar. She was known for her blond ringlets and hazel-speckled eyes. She was a gorgeous girl who caught the attention of all who visited their home. The tale of her death is disputed to date. The agreed upon facts are that as a four-year-old, she was prancing around her mother as they served their seasonal farmworkers mid-morning tea. Some say that while getting tea, the *samavar*<sup>33</sup> fell over and she died from the shock of the boiling water. The version my Nana Jan passed down to her grandchildren was that Akhtar was playing with one of the farmworkers and took some of his tea. He poured the tea into a saucer for her. As she went to take a sip, a drop of tea

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<sup>33</sup> A *Samavar* is a large, goblet shaped metal container used to boil water. A small spout sits at its bottom where it stands on four dainty legs. A teapot is placed on top where the steam helps brew the tea.

splashed onto her chest. Her heart seized and she lost life instantly. Nana Jan said that this farmworker- *chesmesh migereft*, his eye would get people - it was the salty, evil eye.<sup>34</sup> She witnessed the whole scene, swearing that it was just one drop, and there is no way the burn could have been horrific enough to cause death. Whatever the truth may be, the loss of a child is still the loss of a child.

The third child she lost was also a girl, named Fakhri. She was a good helper with household duties but could not resist a good adventure. Her curious toes took her into the creek as her mother was washing clothes. The creek had seen much rain and had become a river. My Nana Jan peddled and panted, keeping her gaze on her little girl being swept upstream. Fakhri's six-year-old body was swallowed whole by the water's rapids.

They say one of deepest wounds one can experience is witnessing the loss of one's own child. My Nana Jan experienced this – not just once, not twice, but three times.

No matter how tough the times got, the flame in her heart burnt slowly. A slow-burning, consistent flame prevented her from becoming bitter with Life.

Garlic too must be cooked over a low, slow-burning flame. One must take special precautions to prevent the garlic for *Sang-e-Seer* from burning. Or else the dish will become

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<sup>34</sup> The “evil eye” or *chesm shoor* describes the negative energy that a jealous person can “hit” another person with. Some Persians believe in this and some do not. Those who believe take precautionary measures such as burning *espan*, wild rue, to protect themselves and their family.

bitter. If using a gas stove, it is recommended to use a *shole pakhsb kon*, simmer ring, to spread the flame evenly.

One of the most tedious steps of preparing *Sang-e-Seer* is the peeling of the garlic. Garlic has a magnificent way of cloaking itself skin that is simultaneously flaky and sticky. This becomes even more difficult when working with the local variety of garlic grown in Kelardasht. Its skin has a purplish tint and the nestled bulbs come in all shapes and sizes. The tiniest of bulbs will burst out from behind a larger one, just to prove their fractalized existence. Since the soil in Kelardasht is more clay-like, the garlic does not have as much space to expand. To grow larger bulbs, garlic needs a porous environment. Local farmers in Kelardasht do their best to prepare their soils in mid-Autumn by adding sand and old sheep and cow dung as fertilizer. The garlic shoots are used as they grow throughout the Winter. And the garlic is harvested in the Spring.

To peel the garlic, you can either use the flat surface of a large knife to smash its skin off. Or, you can peel off the stumpy tails and skin them one at a time. If you chose the latter, I recommend you take a seat and connect with your inner, patient grandmother.

I'm inclined to say "don't try this at home." But the other part of me is eager to share this grandma-method of working with knives. Hold the knife in your dominant hand and the garlic bulb (with skin) in the other hand. At the stumpy tail-end of the bulb, pull the knife toward the garlic, using your thumb as a stopper. The skin should easily slide off along with the unwanted stump of the bulb. This may sound harder and more dangerous than it actually is. It just takes attentive practice. And it allows you to keep the most of the precious garlic

that has spent two seasons growing. If you need help learning this method, you can spot a master by the examining the calloused lines left on their thumbs.

No matter whether the garlic has been smashed, crushed, chopped, pureed, or grated – it will give off its odorous oils. The slower the garlic sizzles, the denser the flavors become. Once the garlic begins to change color, remove it from the heat.

*Sang-e-Seer* embraces garlic's pungency. There is no attempt to disguise the fierce flavor stored within each clove. My Nana Jan embraced her own pungency and never felt the need to disguise her fierceness. During parties, she openly drank alcohol alongside men and danced until her cheeks flushed. After a full-day of work, my Nana Jan would occasionally reward herself with a cold glass of beer. This was before Iran became an Islamic Republic and alcohol was banned.

Unlike most women in the town, Nana Jan did not fear judgment from others. She lived by the *Ahle-Hagh*<sup>35</sup> faith and made decisions according to the truth she knew deep within her soul.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ahle-Hagh* loosely translates to “People of the Truth”. This syncretic faith tradition is also known as *Yarsanism*. God is viewed as the ultimate source of energy, and does not take on any specific form. Rather, all forms of life are seen as holding portions of this divine energy. The *Yarsani* faith encourages embodiment of core values and does not require adherent to strict religious practices as in Islam. An individual's behavior throughout life is a testament to their faith.

One late afternoon, while Nana Jan was finishing washing up some dishes, she heard a pounding on her door. She hesitated before approaching. The panicked pounding continued. She peered through the window to see a local woman holding a lifeless girl in her arms.

*“My daughter! They say she is dead. But I do not believe them. I know she is alive. They were burying her. But I grabbed her and ran here. Please, Mrs. Dr. Movahed, please help me!”*

Nana Jan looked behind the woman. In the distance she saw a group of men wielding shovels, shouting pleas.

*“Do not listen to this mad woman! Let us find our peace! This girl must be buried. We must move on.”*

Nana Jan grabbed the limp, young body from the woman’s arms. They hurried inside. Locking the door was not enough. Nana Jan shoved furniture in front of the door. Moments after, the pounding resumed.

They ran to my Dada Jan. My paternal grandfather was known for ancient remedies that worked miracles. Nana Jan was his most prized assistant. She never tired, even through gruesomely long wound-cleansings and sensitive surgeries.



For three nights and three days, they cared for the little girl. The hoard of mustachioed men lingered at their doorsteps. Nana Jan was the one to answer them. She scolded them for their lack of faith and impatience. She shooed them off her property as if they were alley cats.

Lo and behold, the little girl was alive. She had been in some type of temporary coma. No amount of thank you's were enough to repay my grandparents' service. Until she was alive, the mother would bring my grandparents the offering of a rooster every year. The little girl they saved, now a graying woman, continues this tradition to date.

Nana Jan lost three of her children. Maybe helping resurrect someone else's daughter lightened her load of grief. Motherhood is eternal. Motherhood is boundless.

Nana Jan mothered many. She mothered her own six children. She mothered her husband. She mothered familial youngsters who needed extra care. She mothered her seasonal farmworkers. She mothered her plants. She mothered her trees. She mothered her farm animals.

She mothered her sheep who were mothers themselves. A midwife through many births, she supported ewes in caring for their young. When the lamb's bellies were swollen with their mother's milk, my Nana Jan would take her turn milking. She spent hours churning butter, preparing cheese, and making yogurt.

Full fat, sheep or goat's milk yogurt is ideal for *Sang-e-Seer*. But depending on when and where you're making this, this may be impossible. In Kelardasht, milk is taken from sheep only during the Spring. The tarter the yogurt, the better. In a large bowl, scoop in the yogurt. Using a fork, whisk, or electric beater, blend in one chicken egg. Continue this process until it is evenly mixed. The use of a chicken's egg prevents the yogurt from curdling when it is cooked.

Nana Jan had a special relationship with her chickens. At their peak, they had over forty chickens. She could discern between them, pointing out details like the rusty orange feather hidden underneath a maroon cloak. Somehow, she kept track of their age too. She knew when one was nearing its life and when the time had come to use its meat. Nana Jan was the one who would cut the chicken's neck. She worked swiftly, not blinking one eye.

On occasion, she asked my father to help her with this process. He admits to never having the guts to go through with it. But he loved helping collect the chicken eggs. Mostly because he eagerly anticipated the *nimroo*, scrambled eggs to follow.

One season, Nana Jan noticed that the eggs the chickens were laying kept cracking. All around their yard, they found only remains of crusted orange yolks and tan-colored shells. Not one egg was intact. The clever man he was, Dada Jan diagnosed that the chickens had low calcium. Laying egg after egg is no easy task. It pulls the calcium from their bodies. He began collecting the eggshells and grinding them into a powder. Spread this along with their grains so they can get back some of the calcium they have lost.

Nana Jan was hopeful. But this remedy took time before giving results. In the meantime, it broke her heart to watch these eggs go to waste. It was not fair to the chickens and it was not fair to her. The clever woman she was, Nana Jan sewed mesh sacks to the rear-ends of the hens. The precious pearls were contained before they could be demolished upon impact with the rough ground.

Anytime my Nana Jan's name comes upon someone's tongue, stories are spilled of her tireless work ethic. She sold extra produce from her farm and orchard, saving *rial* upon *rial*. One afternoon, she heard from her neighbors that the piece of land across from theirs was for sale. Her sturdy shoulders held wide, she approached the landowner. Handing him a stack of crumpled bills she had been gathering in the purse she kept at her chest, she purchased the land. No husband was needed to make this transaction. Her fierceness and confidence commanded respect, proving that she was just as much of a breadwinner as her husband.

She shoveled, tilled, plowed, planted, weeded, and harvested.

She cooked, baked, fed, cleaned, washed, sewed, and mended.

They had seasonal workers who helped with orchard, but my Nana Jan was the only full-time staff. Many criticized my grandfather for being stingy and not hiring more help. He was known for keeping a tight grip around his wallet. This may have been the case. But my grandmother also loved her work. The trees in her orchard were her beloveds. The plants in her garden were her children. She cared for them with love and passion. Yes, it was a lot of effort.

Nana Jan would rise with the roosters and fall asleep with the foxes. One night she heard the squealing of a warthog approaching their wheat fields. She awoke her daughter and they ran to prevent the raiding. Her daughter wielded an oil-lantern as Nana Jan swiftly harvested their crop. Within an hour, she finished a field which would normally take four men a whole afternoon. Yes, it was a lot of effort.

But when she tasted the bread she baked with her own wheat topped with jam from her own sour-cherries, it was worth it. The fruit of her labour tasted different. It was her labour of love.

One must be prepared to give the *Sang-e-Seer* extra love at this stage. The herbs have been sautéed, the meat has been cooked, the garlic has been sizzled, and the yogurt has been prepared. Place all the ingredients into one large pot. Raise the heat. Stir the stew continuously. This is a labour of love. The stew must be stirred constantly so it does not crust at the bottom. The sides of the pot will begin to collect layers of the creamy liquid. Use a wooden spatula to scrape the sides and return this aromatic mixture back into the stew.

Once the stew begins to gurgle and burble, reduce the heat slightly. Continue stirring until the ingredients begin to thicken and come together. Then, you can take a rest, reduce the heat even more, and let the stew sit for at least three hours. Add salt and pepper to taste. And if the stew still is not pungent enough to your liking, add raw garlic for a fiercer flavor.

*Sang-e-Seer* is a polarizing dish. If serving this at a dinner party where you are unsure of your audience's flavor profile, it is recommended to prepare something else alongside. Just in case.

When her United States residing son and his family were joining her for dinner, Nana Jan was prepared. Given my father's deep love for *Sang-e-Seer*, she had a big pot ready, set atop the heater to stay warm. She was unsure how her daughter-in-law would feel about this dish. But Nana Jan's prior visit to the U.S. brought her to know my mother, Zohreh, as an adventurous spirit. So she figured it was an appropriate dish to make. This left her two Iranian-American granddaughters. Me and my sister. She had no idea how mainstream American foods had tinted our taste-buds. She leaned on the knowing of *makaroni*, pasta with ground meat, stored in her freezer as a plan B. Her daily tasks were weighted by the extra preparations for our arrival - dusting out the guestroom, preparing the bedspreads, cleaning the toilet and shower, and clearing the yard.

We cruised up their long driveway, with pine trees lining either side. The car was barely parked when I noticed tears filling up my father's eyes. Homesickness finally caught up with him. The Islamic Revolution in 1979 had prevented my parents from returning home for over 15 years. And after that, the twelve-hour workdays which kept his business running, prevented my father from taking extended time off. We were fortunate in being able to visit Iran in 10-day increments every few years or so. Each time we visited, our relatives marveled at my growth - how I had stretched with height, grown arm hair, and developed acne.

Between compressed embraces, we slipped off our shoes at the doorsteps and entered their home. A hall lined with handwoven ruby red and royal blue Kelardashti carpets welcomed us. We had barely greeted all the aunts, uncles, and cousins who had gathered around our arrival before the *sofreh*, dining cloth, was spread for dinner. The daughters of my aunts swiftly arranged the dining ware. One melamine plate per person along with a spoon. And if there were enough, a fork. Small bowls filled with yogurt. Saucers filled with *sir torshi*, pickled garlic. Quarters of raw onion. Plates of salad. Platters of steaming hot rice. And bowls of *Sang-e-Seer*.

My parents were too busy catching up with relatives to notice that dinner had been served. My grandmother and aunts repeated *befarmain*, let's eat! with ever-increasing volume to herd all the stragglers. We squeezed our way around the *sofreh*. I watched how others sat with one knee folded all the way behind them as a seat and the other knee bent vertically. This appeared to be the way to take up the least amount of space possible. My sister and I huddled close, a column of familiarity in this foreign land.

My Nana Jan locked her gaze on the two of us as everyone filled their plates. Before we had the chance to serve ourselves, she called us to follow her. She had a surprise for us. We wandered down to the far end of the hall, on the left side, through a door that led into the refrigerator and freezer room. A hazy, yellow lightbulb hung nakedly, with its wire exposed. She thrust open the freezer door. Shelf after shelf was filled to the brim with packets of chopped herbs, sautéed garlic, crushed walnuts, and chunked meats. She pierced through layers of frost, fingering her way through the freezer. Her sturdy cheekbones lifted as she

yanked out her surprise with a grin. The frozen *makaroni* that her foreign-born granddaughters may prefer to *Sang-e-Seer*.

I peered down at the frosted package she grasped with her thick palm. Speckles of ground meat could be made out beneath tumeric-tinted noodles. I wondered what year she had made this *makaroni*. Thankfully, my quick-witted sister broke the silence.

*“How kind of you, Nana Jan, but we are eager to taste the dish you’ve prepared for us. There’s no need to worry. We eat everything!”*

Nana Jan tossed the *makaroni* back into the freezer and whirled her way back to the hall. She filled the bowls of *Sang-e-Seer* with more stew, seeing as to how everyone had heaps of it on their plates. We slid our way back into place, taking position once again. The *Sang-e-Seer* offered me pungent comfort. This blood-pressure lowering dish layered on top of jet lag led us into a deep slumber.

The next morning, I awoke to the sounds of my chattering father catching up with his parents over tea. My sister had been up for a while, but was waiting for me to go downstairs together. Our mom was still asleep. We found our way into the kitchen, and joined the others in breaking fast with flatbread and feta cheese. A couple hours later, just in time for lunch, my well-rested mother, Zohreh, made her way down the stairs. As we helped prepare the lunch spread, my mom saw that we had a new dish to dine on. She politely asked my Nana Jan if there were any leftovers of the *Sang-e-Seer*. She was in love. A small pot was re-

heated specially for my mother. After lunch, Zohreh blissfully made her way back to bed. The *Sang-e-Seer* induced slumber slowly adjusted her to Iran Standard Time.

## **Zohreh | Independence | Zucchini Frittata with Dill**

Ingredients:

*3 bunches of fresh dill (or 3 cups of dried dill)*

*5 zucchini squash*

*10 chicken eggs*

*turmeric, salt & pepper to taste*

Preparation:

Herb frittatas or what we call *kookkoo* in Persian, are a gift for those who have busy lives and little time to feed hungry bellies. There are many variations of these frittatas – all the way from potato to fish egg *kookkoo*. Differences aside, there are two things all *kookkoo* have in common – eggs and herbs.

To prepare the zucchini and dill *kookkoo*, the first step is to fill two large bowls with cold water. In one bowl, place the fresh dill and shimmy it around a bit by spreading out your fingers. This allows the bunches to loosen up from one another and get fully immersed in the water. In the second bowl, place the whole, unpeeled zucchini. Add a spoonful of salt in each bowl to help disinfect. This last step is especially important when using produce grown in unfamiliar soil. Allow to soak for at least 5 minutes if you're in a hurry or up to 15 minutes if you've got time.



My mother, Zohreh, prepares the zucchini a bit differently. She worries that gritty remnants on the zucchini skin will get into the food. So she normally peels off their skin then washes them.

This is a source of tension between her and my father. You see, my father lives by his father's maxim – *“If a fruit or vegetable's skin is darker than its flesh, the skin is more valuable in vitamins than its flesh.”* My grandfather and his father both were traditional folk doctors, so their medical related sayings carry weight to this day.

I've adopted the skin-keeping practice and reassure my mother that soaking the zucchini in cold, salty water will wash away any worry. If she has the time, she has begun doing the same.

My mother's life now looks quite different than it used to. Now, post-retirement from her 23-year career with a public water utility company in Maryland, she works with my father at his small water engineering company. Now, when it's her turn for dinner, she has the luxury of taking the afternoon off. It also helps that she has only a 7 to 10-minute commute. At her old job, her commute could take anywhere from 40 minutes to 1 hour and a half.

The commute was worth it though, especially when my sister and I were little. Her old office building had a daycare on the first floor. She could drop us off downstairs and come visit us during her lunch break. The extra bonus was that when we were really little, she would come breastfeed us as needed.

She committed to her job throughout our childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. Her workplace provided the whole family with excellent insurance, including coverage for our eyes and our teeth. My mom, Zohreh, started off as an Environmental Engineer, problem-solving her way through water treatment challenges with calculations and inspections. She proved herself to be an excellent employee. Zohreh quickly made her way up through the management ladder. She started off on the 1st floor, and after 23 years, made her way up to the highest floor of the incandescent blue skyscraper.

For those who know her history, Zohreh's hard work ethic comes as no surprise. At the ripe age of 9, she showcased her willpower and independence. She joined two of her siblings in intensive individualized summer study to skip grades. It all started when their father, Mohammad Ali Yousefi, heard that children could skip grades in school by studying for the qualifying exam over the summer.

First, he had his 6<sup>th</sup> born son, Yousof, try it out to skip one grade and start middle school one year early. Their household had heavy discipline when it came to studies. Yousof was on his own, with only a book to guide him. He studied hard, passed the test, and became first in the family to have skipped a grade. The next summer, their 7<sup>th</sup> born daughter, Zahra, wanted to try. But she was ready to increase the challenge level. She wanted to skip two grades and go straight into middle school. Her parents were skeptical if she could handle the pressure, but gave their blessing. As soon as Zohreh, the 8<sup>th</sup> born, heard about this, she demanded equity. She too wanted to be given a chance. My mother Zohreh had just finished 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, but was ready for middle school too, or so she thought. With confidence, she declared that

they sign her name up for the qualifying exams. She would study her older sibling's books for 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> grade. She wanted to start 7<sup>th</sup> grade with her sister.

The parents sent her out of the room so they could discuss in private.

*"She's just a child! There's no way she can pass."* Her father was worried little Zohreh would be crushed by her inevitable failure.

*"Let's just let her try. We know she won't pass. But at least she'll have a head start on her studies."* Her mother was sure her little girl would be more hurt if they did not grant her the chance to at least try. But she too shared her husband's hefty skepticism.

Little Zohreh heard their whole conversation. She quickly wiped away tears as she heard them open the door.

*"Okay, Zohrehchi<sup>36</sup>, go ahead and study this summer for the exam. Just don't get upset if you don't pass."*

A sonata of determination flooded her ears. Not only would she study all summer long. But she would pass. And she would skip not one, not two, but three grades.

Surprise surprise, she actually passed. To some, being a 9-year-old in 7<sup>th</sup> grade would seem intimidating. But for Zohreh? She was used to being the youngest one around. Born in late

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<sup>36</sup> In their hometown of Shahreza, the addition of the phrase *"chi"* is commonly added to words to emphasize smallness.

August, she just barely made the cut-off when starting 1<sup>st</sup> grade. She could have waited to start the following year, but there was no way she would let that happen. My mom spilled at the seams with excitement to start school.

There was only one problem – Zohreh’s young age made her an easy target to get picked on. Thankfully though, her sister Zahra, just one grade above, was there to keep her safe. One afternoon, during recess, her sister came to grab her for a game of chase out in the schoolyard.

*“I can’t. I have to go get water for the sister of our patrol.”*

*“You have to do WHAT? Says who!”* Zahra yanked the cup out of Zohreh’s hands and threw it to the ground.

Apparently, my mother had been bossed around for weeks by their class patrol. Simple and naïve, Zohreh believed she had to do everything the patrol said.

Zahra wouldn’t tolerate another minute of witnessing this abuse of power. She stormed up to the class patrol, steaming in disbelief.

*“How DARE you boss around my LITTLE sister! And you have the nerve to call yourself our patrol?!”*

The class patrol was appointed based on her size. A hefty youngster, she towered over the two other girls. With a smirk on her face, she gloated in her power over my mother.

*“Zobreh, I’m feeling a little thirsty now. Go get me a cup of water.”*

Without blinking an eye, my mother pivoted toward the water fountain and was preparing to launch off.

*“Wait! Zobreh! DO NOT take one step forward. You stay RIGHT here where you are.”*

The patrol cleared her throat and re-stated her command. *“Zobreh, I said, go get me water.”*

My mother stood between them, eyelashes batting with wonder of what to do.

Enough was enough. The spark was lit. Zahra leapt toward the patrol, claws enraged by injustice. She wielded any weapon she could against the perpetrator who harassed her little sister. Scratches were made, flesh was bitten, and hair was pulled.

To her surprise, the patrol showed no reaction. So Zahra pulled her hair harder. Still, the hefty patrol showed no reaction. She was puzzled because she herself was in so much pain.

By this time the school guard had arrived and was shouting at the girls.

*“WHAT do you TWO think you’re DOING? And you? You should know better! SUPPOSEDLY, you’re our class PATROL!”*

*“But, m-m-miss, she started it, I-I-I didn’t do anything wrong!”* The patrol stammered defensively.

My aunt made no attempt at defending her actions. She was too busy wallowing in the painful realization that – the whole time – she had in fact been pulling her *own* hair...

This would not be the last time my aunt looked after her little sister. When they made their transatlantic trip to study abroad in the United States, my aunt reassured their mother that she would take care of her little sister.

There was only problem. Neither of them really knew how to cook. A pair of studious sisters, Zohreh and Zahra barely knew how to make rice. Thankfully, they wouldn’t be alone. Their older brother, Hessam, 4<sup>th</sup> born, would be coming to the U.S. with them. He was their mother’s understudy. He spent his free time in the kitchen, helping prepare food for his nine siblings. Not only did Hessam’s time in the kitchen train him to be an excellent chef, but he also was the ear who heard their mother empty her heavy heart.

And so their adventures began. They started off at a community college in Houston, TX where they had been given a student visa. The Iranian Shah at the time had secured some deal with the State of Texas, granting Iranian students in-state tuition to universities across the state. After a few weeks, Zohreh felt settled and wanted to get a part-time job in addition to her studies. She saw others working and she too wanted financial independence.

One of their friends pulled a few strings and got Zohreh a job at a 24-hr local donut shop.

The only problem was that she would need to work the night shifts. She didn't complain though because she knew no-one else would hire a 15-year-old, female immigrant.

Eager as can be, she went to work. The other employee gave her a 20-minute training and then clocked out. She was left to fend for herself. She barely knew how to work the register let alone stay awake from 10pm to 6am. Stumbling through English words, she made her way through transactions. At the end of her shift, the manager came to find that they had made \$3,000 in sales, but only \$30 in the register. Turns out the .00 she was hitting after every transaction actually meant 00.

Needless to say, it was her first and last night working there.

Zohreh eagerly swallowed up her studies. But she was still hungry for more. She wanted to work. She wanted her independence. Another friend used his connections to get her a job as a bus girl at a country club for the Texas elite. The long hours on her feet didn't bother her. What really bugged her was seeing the half-finished food on people's plates and being forced to throw it in the trash. My mother strongly dislikes wasting.

Waste of all kind irritates her. More than anything though, the wasting of water is what really gets on her nerves.

Once the zucchini and dill have soaked and any dirt has settled, remove them into a strainer. But DO NOT, I repeat, DO NOT dump the dirty water back into the sink. The sink drain helps us ignore the reality of how much water we actually use. We soak everything in a bowl

so we can retain the water.

If you have indoor plants, you can quench their thirst with this perfectly good gritty water. If there are trees, bushes, or grass outdoors, give them a splash. If you do not live alongside any permeable greenery, perhaps simply take a look at the amount of water that is at your disposal, and offer a moment of gratitude before sending it down the drain.

Once the zucchini is clean, feel free to give it any spot treatment by using a knife to carve out any questionable blotches on the skin. Then, lay the zucchini horizontally on its side, and slice into ½ inch dials. It is best if these are about even thickness. But do not overstress as my mother says, since perfection is impossible.

Before sautéing the zucchini, use a fork to poke a set of holes in each dial to ensure their core is cooked. Place a medium-sized, nonstick pan on the stove with a medium high flame. It is very important to use a nonstick pan. This will make your life much easier.

Once the pan is warm, drizzle in cooking oil of your choice. There should be a thin layer of oil lining the pan. Once the oil is nice and hot, take a step back. Begin putting the dials of zucchini, one by one, into the pan. If you feel you can handle the responsibility, you can have two pans going at once like my mother does.

My mother Zohreh has always been good at handling responsibility. As a seven-year-old, she was entrusted to fry a huge pan of eggplants. Her mom set her up with a chair next to their



single-burner outdoor gas stove. With a fork in hand, my mother beamed in pride at the responsibility she was given. She admired each eggplant, as it sizzled in the hot oil. The browning of its raw white exterior was her cue to flip it around with the fork.

Delighted by her ability to elegantly flip each eggplant, my mother's self-confidence skyrocketed. Her self-assurance was so high that suddenly she felt herself being lifted up in the air. In a moment of separation, her spirit lifted out of her body to grant a bird's-eye-view of herself. A small girl, sitting beside the stove, perfectly frying eggplant.

So responsible. So capable. So brave. So independent.

Zohreh's spirit spilled back into her body as she smelt a close call of the eggplant's flesh being burnt. Her fork scraped away at its skin until she was able to release it from the pan.

When sautéing the zucchini, one must pay careful attention that the skin is not overly seared. A golden brown with darkened edges is ideal. Flip each one carefully until both sides are nicely browned. Once browned, leave in the pan and turn off the heat.

It is your choice how much attention you'd like to offer the zucchini. If you feel pressed for time or would like to test your capacity to multi-task, feel free to chop the dill while you wait for the zucchini to brown.

Fresh dill is ideal. It's sprightly, slightly spiky, and offers the tongue tastes of Earthy Spring-time.

This being said – dried dill is a good runner up. If you're pressed for time or limited in your herb supply, dried dill is a totally acceptable go-to.

A jar of dried dill in the pantry is an absolute staple for working mothers like my mom.

If you're using dried dill, feel free to skip ahead. Just don't get carried away like my mom and skip 3 steps ahead!

To chop the fresh dill, you'll want a sharp knife and a cutting board. I say "want" because it is not a "need." But it most definitely makes the job easier. Take small bunches of the dill at a time, and line them up facing the same direction. All the "tails" facing one direction, and all the "heads" facing the other. Hold the knife in your dominant hand and use your other hand to create a downward-facing, cupped grip. This both holds down the flailing herbs and keeps your fingers from getting sliced. You can begin to increase the speed of this motion, moving up and down the herb pile to get an even chop. If you'd really like a challenge, you can try switching up which hand you're holding the knife to strengthen your non-dominant hand-eye coordination. That's my addition to the process. Your goal is to get the dill into flakes the size of your pinky fingernail.

If you're living with easy access to electricity, you can of course chop this in a food processor. But I find it satisfying to use my muscles. Plus, I feel it adds more to the whole labor of love.

When the dill is chopped, it is time to prepare the eggs. Crack the chicken eggs into a bowl. If you like to stay on the safe side, I recommend you crack them one at a time first into a smaller bowl, then put them into a larger bowl. This is in the rare event that one of the eggs is bloody or spoiled. This way, you won't have ruined the whole batch of eggs.

Before you begin beating the eggs, add some salt, pepper, and tumeric. It's important to know that the amount of salt you put can either make or break this dish. It is very easy to end up with *kookoo* that is either under-salted or over-salted because eggs absorb salt quickly. So this is one of those times where it's best to find the goldilocks, sweet-spot in the middle. But you know whose taste buds you're tailoring this to, so sway your salt accordingly.

Salt is important. When used appropriately, salt can enhance all the other flavors in a dish. Sodium is actually an important electrolyte and can surprisingly help maintain your body's hydration. We have quite the respect for salt in Persian culture. When describing someone or something as "cute" or "clever," we use the phrase *ba-namak*, which literally translates to "with salt." And we mean this as a good thing. It is basically the opposite as in English when the expression "salty" is used to describe the state of being angry, or bitter.

After you've put what you sense is the "right" amount of salt, pepper, and turmeric, begin beating the eggs. There's no need to stress too much about the salt level since we use a taste-testing trick before we make the whole frittata. To beat the eggs, I like to use my muscles and a fork. This can also be done with a whisk or electric beater. Your *kookoo*, your call.

Beating the eggs can be a surprisingly tiring task. The yolks must be whipped thoroughly and the whole mixture should begin to fluff.

When beating the eggs, it's important to have rhythmically repetitive dedication.

My mother has mastered this art of rhythmic dedication. Ten hour shifts up on her feet left her whipped, but she never missed a beat. Somehow she managed to go to school full-time, work part-time, and participate in their community gatherings. Scheduling became far more complicated given that she was sharing a car with two of her siblings at the time. And they would almost always give their friends rides to the University.

They would spend all day during the weekdays on campus, in class and at the library. The weekends required a bit more planning since that was when they all worked different jobs. Aside from occasional delays, this schedule worked well.

This schedule worked well until one morning, the siblings came out of their apartment in Houston, TX to find four flat tires and shattered front and back windshields. They rumbled around in their brains for a logical explanation. Then, 6 bullet holes were discovered. One in each tire and one through each windshield.

No time could be lost in panic. Three people needed to get to class. They called a tow company and got a ride from their friends to campus that day. A hefty estimate of \$1000 was given for the damages done. With the help of their friends, money was gathered quickly. Two weeks were spent hitching rides and using pitiful public transportation until their car was ready.

With exhausted satisfaction, they parked their car in the assigned spot just in front of their apartment. They rested the night with reassurance of their working car. Dawn broke as the siblings awoke. The groggy eyes that got them out the door were yanked open in shock. Their car was grazing the asphalt, once again, with four flat tires and two shattered windshields. Once again, there were 6 bullet holes found.

They were most shocked to realize their neighbor was paying such careful attention to them. And quite surprised that he knew they were Iranian.

It was surely a hate crime, but there was no use in calling the police. After all, it was Texas in 1979. Iranians were known for only one thing – the hostage crisis. Fifty-two U.S. diplomats and citizens had been held captive by extremist Muslim students at the U.S. embassy in Iran for over a year. In Texas, hate-filled signs adorned storefronts to warn “No Iranian Dogs Allowed.”

They carried their devastated hearts back inside. The past two weeks had kept them in an emotional pressure cooker. And the steam valve needed to be released. They eventually called their older brother for help. Mammad (4<sup>th</sup> born), lived about an hour up North. He agreed to switch cars with them and urged them to never again park in front of their apartment. Thus began their evening ritual of finding street parking far, far away from the hateful gaze of their xenophobic neighbor. The siblings were so caught up with disguising their car, that they never stopped to think that they too could end up with bullet holes in them.

My mother and her fellow Iranian-immigrants learned how to blend into the “melting pot” of “American culture” the hard way. They disguised themselves as being Italian, Greek, Turkish, or whatever nationality that could explain their tinted skin and dark hair. Blending in was their ticket to success in the “Deep South.”

Once the eggs are fully blended, it is time to add in the chopped dill. Once together, mix them again well. If you can afford the time, let this mixture sit for a few minutes on the counter. It allows for the flavors to settle well with one another.

Perhaps the same is true for my mother’s immigration experience. With time to settle, she has found a way to preserve her Iranian flavor within the mixture of the United States’ conglomerated culture.

Now is the stage in the *kookoo* where the separate parts are joined together, yet remain distinct. The egg-dill mixture will meet the zucchinis, who have patiently been waiting at the stove. Before we let them unite, we engage in a precautionary practice. Remember how I said it’s very easy to have this dish come out with an imperfect amount of salt? I’m going to let you in on a family trick.

Heat up a bit of oil in a small saucepan. When the oil is hot, drop in a spoonful of the egg-dill batter. When it has sizzled nicely on one side and is beginning to crust, flip it over. Once both sides are cooked, let it cool slightly. The eagerness may tempt you to stick it straight in

your mouth. But, experience has proved that this leads only to singed taste buds that prevent one from enjoying upcoming tasty creations. Once it has cooled, you can taste the level of saltiness. Keep in mind that this will be added to the zucchini which has no salt. Beat in some more salt if it needs. Or if it is on the salty side, you can downplay it by adding some more dill (fresh or dried) or another egg. If it's wayyy to salty, I'm afraid I can't help you. That's beyond my paygrade.

Once the batter has passed the taste-test, it is time to allow for the union with the zucchini. Turn up the heat under the pans hosting the zucchini to a medium high. Once you hear the sizzling oil, pour in the batter. Use a rubber spatula to scrape out every last bit of mixture. Shake the saucepan to spread out the batter to fully cover the zucchini dials.

After about a minute or two on medium heat, turn down the stove slightly. There may be a tendency to want to rush this stage and flip over the *kookoo* quickly. I recommend giving the *kookoo* space by turning down the heat, putting on a lid, and going about your other tasks. Or perhaps this can be the perfect moment to take a seat and even have a catnap.

My mother is the master of catnaps. She can shut her eyes for 10 minutes and wakeup entirely recharged. Her exhaustive job history has likely trained her body into soaking up sleep any chance she has. While she was a full-time student, she kept her part-time bus girl gig. She slowly made her way to being a waitress at various chain restaurants like Marie Callender's, IHOP, and Pizza Hut.

One late-night shift at Pizza Hut, my mom was cleaning off all the tables. A group of rowdy teenagers gathered at a booth. Between cackling laughter, they watched my mother's tired hands at work. One by one, she lifted the shakers full of parmesan cheese and red pepper flakes to wipe down the table underneath. The hoard of adolescents finally left, somehow catching the hint that the restaurant had long been closed.

My mother continued her task with monotonous mindlessness. Approach table. Spray cleaner. Lift shakers. Wipe down. Repeat.

As she grabbed the next shaker, suddenly, a stream of parmesan gushed out. Her instincts urged her to immediately place it back on the table. After a few huffy breaths, she came closer to this enchanted shaker. She slid her way into the booth and slowly lifted the shaker. Within seconds, a pile of cream-speckled cheesy flakes had formed again on the table.

Turns out the pesky pranksters had screwed open the shaker, flipped it upside down, and left the lid resting on top. Infuriatingly clever craftsmanship.

Well past her 2am clock out time, my mother cradled her weary heart she started over. This time new steps were added. Re-fill shaker. Sweep. Approach table. Spray cleaner. Wipe down booth. Wipe down table. Repeat.

My mother Zohreh was living and working in the United States when "The American Dream" still manifested into reality. She went to school full-time, paying in-state tuition of about \$250 per semester. She worked between 20 - 24 hours/week, making \$2/hour plus



tips, totaling around \$50 /shift. Her rent was \$250/month (utilities included) split between 3 other people. They paid an additional \$30/month for a phone line for domestic calls. Long-distance calls were exorbitantly expensive, amounting to \$8 dollars/minute. Phone calls home were out of the question. Letters were exchanged instead. And after purchasing groceries, there was barely enough to stash away in savings. She managed her expectations and lived a relatively comfortable life.

Hard work, combined with affordable tuition and living expenses, enabled my mother to earn her Bachelor of Science in Chemical Engineering from the University of Houston in 1984.

My father, Behnam, also played a significant role in this process.

My mother and father first met in an Iranian Student's Association back in Texas. Young Iranian immigrants gathered to hold cultural celebrations and educational workshops. Most importantly, they were each other's support system. My mother was privileged to have immigrated with her siblings. Most other immigrants had made the journey alone and were eager for community. Together they re-created the smells and tastes of their shared homeland.

To this day, my father boasts that he is the one who put my mother on track to graduate and kindle her now deep-seeded passion for water.

*"When I met your mother, she had taken 200 credits and still had not even declared a major!"*

*“It’s not my fault that every class was so fascinating!”* My mother defends her colorful course transcript.

*“I would take one Intro to Physics class and fall in love. So I had to take Physics II and Thermodynamics. Then I would take Chemistry I and become mesmerized by the complex composition of the molecules that make up our world! So I had to take Organic Chemistry.”*

Their close friends were all 2/3<sup>rd</sup> the way through their degree requirements and were counting down the months till graduation. Many had already begun applying for white-collar jobs or Master’s programs. As for Zohreh? She still had no idea what her Bachelor’s degree was in. One afternoon, my father sat her down, charted out all the feasible possibilities, eager to find a solution to this problem. A true Civil Engineer in the making.

After a few hours of negotiation, they settled on Chemical Engineering.

She was nearly complete with her course work. But there was only one problem, Zohreh still didn’t have a topic for her senior project. This is where my father’s help came in handy.

Behnam had taken one course on water and had become absorbed with its worldly importance. He convinced my mother to focus on water treatment. They researched differences between the more advanced Ozone disinfection used by Europe and the weaker strategy of treating with Chlorine used by the United States. Behnam spent hours doing research in the library. His skinny legs would surprise Zohreh as he stood outside her classes,

eager to share his results.

Together, they wrote her final project, titled “Our Thirsty World.”

Their love for one another grew as they dived into the depths of water research. Both were accepted into Master’s programs at the University of Maryland in Environmental Engineering.

My mother was offered a Research Assistantship which meant her tuition was fully covered and she was offered a stipend.

My mother couldn’t balance this equation. Her calculations didn’t add up.

*“You mean, they will PAY me to LEARN?!”*

After years of working odd hours to finance her education, Zohreh finally had the opportunity to bask in liberty of leisurely learning.

My mother would have occasional moments of panic while she worked in the lab – still in complete disbelief of her situation.

*“They’re going to catch me. These paychecks they’re giving me... I think it’s the amount I owe the University!”*

Needless to say, she made an excellent Research Assistant. So good that after she graduated with a Master's, her advisor didn't want to give her up. She was persuaded to continue onto a Ph.D.

Although she was excited about the opportunity, she was tired. And plus, my father had graduated with a Master's and was not going back for more. He was eager to find a job in his field. It was time to retire from his career of odd-jobs ranging from valet parking to washing machine repair.

But Zohreh couldn't get off the hook so easy. Her oldest brother, Mehdi (1<sup>st</sup> born) was a successful Geriatric Dentist by this point and convinced her to keep going while she had the steam.

*"If you don't do it now, you'll never come back to finish. You know you have it in you, Zohrehchi"*

So she did. Just three years later, she finished with her Ph.D. in Environmental Engineering from the same university.

My mother always says that her Ph.D. is what has granted her such independence in life. It is a ticket that has allowed her onto many rides and a nearly instant way to gain respect. As a female Engineer in the 80s, she learned the importance of carrying herself with confidence.

At this stage in the *kookoo*, confidence is key. By now, one side of the frittata should be entirely cooked. To test if the *kookoo* is ready to be flipped, shake the pan side to side. If a

nice crust has formed and the center is thick, it is ready. If the center is still liquidy, put the lid back on and wait longer. If you are rushed for time, turn up the heat slightly. Take care that the heat is not too strong since the *kookoo* will burn.

When it is time to flip the *kookoo*, find a flat platter or tray that is larger than the pan. Place the tray on top of the pan. Protect your hands since the pan is hot. At this stage, I find it absolutely critical to take a deep breath. This is the moment to connect with a source of confidence. I usually do a special *kookoo* prayer at this point, but my mother never needs that. She radiates with security.

*“Whatever happens, happens. I always try my best. Worst case, it turns out ugly. But I know it’ll be delicious!”*

When you are ready to flip, perhaps use a 3-2-1 go countdown and turn the pan upside down, circling up and away from you.

If the *kookoo* was well-cooked, you will get a nice, golden brown crust showcasing the zucchini dials. Turn the heat up to medium and slide the *kookoo* off the tray, back into the nonstick pan. Usually, there is enough oil leftover, but if there isn’t, add a drizzle.

If the crust wasn’t nicely formed, the whole mixture may be watery and end up filling the tray. No need to panic. Slide as much as you can back into the pan. Use a spatula to reform it in shape. Give it time to cook.

If not all of the *kookoo* releases from the pan, and part of it is stuck – use a spatula to loosen that segment. Line the pan with oil and put together the pieces. Take a few breaths and reassure yourself that it will all be okay. As my mother says, it’s the taste that matters. And the bonus is, most of the times, the egginess helps weld together the broken pieces.

Once both sides are cooked, the *kookoo* is ready to be served! This can be eaten hot or cold – it depends on your preference. It is definitely a dish that can easily be prepared well in advance of guests and re-heated at the last minute.

This zucchini frittata with dill is one of my mother’s go-to recipes. It’s a quick, nutritious meal. And plus, it can be prepared using dried dill and still be quite delicious. This *kookoo* is a testament to my mother’s independence.

She has held flexibility as she navigates her roles as a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother, an Engineer, and a manager. Her mind has been her gateway to independence. Her love for learning has granted her financial independence since she was in her early twenties

If the fact that she skipped three grades wasn’t enough proof, it’s safe to say my mom is a nerd for learning. When I was in middle school, she would flip through the pages of my Science textbooks with delight.

*“Isn’t it so cool that you GET to learn all this?!”* she would declare with awe.

My mother has always been quick to remind us just how much of a privilege it is to receive

formal academic training.

After all, my mother Zohreh had grown up hearing the tales of *her* mother, Monavar Navab - a living testament to the pain endured when a young girl is prevented from studying.

### **Monavar | Unconditional Love | Beef and Potato Cutlet**

Ingredients:

*1/2 kilo of ground beef (percentage fat of choice)*

*4 raw potatoes*

*5 chicken eggs*

*1 small onion*

*2 cloves of garlic*

*salt, pepper, cinnamon, turmeric, and dried mint to taste*

Preparation:

The English word “cutlet” is said to come from the French word, *côtelette*, meaning “little rib.”<sup>37</sup> I bring this to light since the Persian word we use, *kotlet*, is nearly identical. I’m not surprised since a number of Persian words are influenced by French such as *merci* for “thank you” or *commode* for “closet.”

In the 40s, French was taught as a third language in Iran. First is Persian and second is Arabic. The Shah at the time had friendly relations with “the West” and saw French as a

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<sup>37</sup> <https://www.etymonline.com/word/cutlet>

strategically important language to learn. Now, the Ayatollah does not have friendly relations with “the West.” Yet English is taught as a third language.

My maternal grandmother, Monavar Beigom Navab, could speak a bit of French. Well, she couldn't *really* speak French. But she did know a few songs that had French phrases in them! The most memorable one being a silly tune from the perspective of an Iranian man pursuing a French woman, and finally declaring “*mademoiselle bonsoir!*”

She was a jokester, my grandma. We called her *maman bozorg* which translates literally to “big mother.” She wasn't exactly a large mother. But she was the mother of a large family, and the grandmother of an even larger family.

Monavar Navab was the mother of 10 children, grandmother of 17 children, and great-grandmother to 13 children. And there are more on their way that she won't physically meet. She was used to large families since she was one of 8 children. But, Mohammad Ali Yousefi, the man she would come to marry, was an only child.

Large families both give immense love and take immense love. Before she came to Iran, my grandmother must have been Queen of the Land of Unconditional Love.

To this day, three years after her passing, all of her own children and her grandchildren argue over who was her favorite. You see, she had this magical way of giving each one of us a unique form of love which left us confident that it was because she loved us “the most.”



Love gives and love takes. My grandmother showed me – no matter how tightly life wrings you, it is impossible to ever milked dry of love.

To prepare the *kotlet*, grate the potatoes onto a plate. While you have the grater in hand, go ahead and grate the onion as well into a separate bowl.

One handful at a time, begin to squeeze out water from the shredded potato.

Cup both hands and press firmly to get as much moisture out as possible. Put the “dehydrated” potato into another plate.

If you are concerned the raw potatoes won't fully cook when being fried in the *kotlet* mixture, you can par-boil them beforehand, then shred them. There will no longer be a need to squeeze out the water. If you choose to par-boil them, remove while they are still hard. If the potatoes are too soft, they will crumble when mixing them with the meat. But I assure you, the raw potato works perfectly in this dish.

In the case of potatoes, being cooked makes one softer. I point this out because in Persian, when we want to say someone is experienced, we say they are *pokbteh*, or “cooked.” They have hardened to the realities of life. This is similar to the concept of being “seasoned” in English. In contrast, when commenting on naïveté, or over-softness, we use the word *khaam*, or “raw.”

My grandmother was hardened in her rawest state. Like the potato, she didn't need to be

cooked before being ready to serve her role in the intergenerational court.

She was 13 when suitors began coming for her hand in marriage. As the daughter of Haj Seyed Abdol Ghasem Navab, a wealthy oil merchant in Shahreza, she unwittingly called much attention. She couldn't care less though. My grandmother, Monavar, was too busy climbing trees and playing with the neighborhood kids to be thinking about boys.

Monavar had a comfortable childhood. Her father was the first one to bring a car to their hometown of Shahreza. Anytime their driver would pull up to their front door, a horde of locals would gather around to marvel at the sleek machinery. On occasion, he would travel to Russia to secure strategic partnerships. He eventually got approval to open a small oil company in their town. They had consistent help in the house to cook, clean, and support with yard work.

Thankfully, her father was *pokbteh*, seasoned by his lived experiences. He cared for his children and offered equal opportunities to his 4 daughters and 4 sons. When the time had come to marry them off, Seyed Abdol Ghasem held extravagant feasts. He was a man who relished in celebration. Entertainment was hired. Festivities streamed throughout 7 days and 7 nights.

The initial suitors who pursued Monavar did not make it past the first round. Her father immediately declined. There was one gentleman, though, who Seyed Abdol Ghasem couldn't help but be impressed by.

To first meet with who he hoped to be his future father-in-law, Mohammad Ali Yousefi, was not himself present. He sent someone else on his behalf. He saw it more respectful to first gain the permission to meet with Seyed Abdol Ghasem – and if approval was gained – to present himself at the next meeting.

Amongst the others, Mohammad Ali Yousefi's name drew attention for he was the young boy who Seyed Abdol Ghasem had helped support through primary school. Mohammad Ali was left father-less at seven-months-old. He lived with his mother not too far from the extravagant two-story home that Seyed Abdol Ghasem's family lived in.

Upon hearing about Mohammad Ali's case, Seyed Abdol Ghasem offered support to pay for the boy's school fees. Mohammad Ali bashfully accepted this support. He just wanted to reduce the heavy load on the shoulders of his single mother. The bi-yearly charity was accepted until he turned sixteen.

He had graduated from High School and had traveled to Mamasani, a nearby province to become a teacher. Mohammad Ali proudly wrote to Seyed Abdol Ghasem.

*“I am immensely grateful for the support you have offered so far. There is no doubt in my mind that I could have made it to where I am without your help. Thank you for acting like a father to me. I am writing to let you know that I am in Mamasani receiving training to become a teacher. I will no longer be needing any financial help. Thank you again, Sir. I look forward to seeing you the next time I return to Shabrezga.”*

Little did Seyed Abdol Ghasem know, the next time he would hear Mohammad Ali's name

was amongst the suitors asking for my grandmother's hand in marriage.

Before creating the full *kotlet* mixture with the meat, the chicken eggs must thoroughly be beat. When they have been whipped well, put in the “dehydrated” shredded potato. Mix these together with care. The starch from the potato will combine with the coagulation property of the eggs. Then, when married with the meat, this will allow the *kotlet* to stay unified.

Next, dump the shredded onion on top of the meat. Crush the garlic with the flat edge of a knife and chop it finely. Or use a grater to get finer pieces. Or you can even use garlic powder, but my grandmother didn't have access to that back in the day. Sprinkle in the remaining spices and herbs. The dash of cinnamon helps ground the meaty taste while the dried mint complements with an elevated fresh note. Add the amount of salt and pepper you feel is right. And don't worry, you'll get to taste it to check if the salt level is enough.

Now, pour the egg-potato blend into the bowl with the meat mixture. Roll your sleeves up. Get prepared to dive in. For whatever reason, if you'd like to prevent your hands from getting meaty, feel free to wear disposable gloves.

Begin massaging in all the ingredients together. Their union requires attentive dedication. After a few minutes, it may seem like the mixture is ready. But it probably isn't. It's important to get a transformation in the texture. You want the meat to accept the flavors and soften up from your touch. When it is ready, the mixture will become sticky and glossy. Test its readiness by using your fingers to pull up a scoop. If it is loose and still sticks

together, you'll know it's ready.

My great-grandfather, Seyed Abdol Ghasem, wasn't sure if his daughter was ready to be married. But Mohammad Ali seemed like a strong contender and someone his daughter could be entrusted with. Time proved that Mohammad Ali was could "pull himself up by his bootstraps" – or as we say in Persian – *gelim kbodesh ra az ab keshid* - he could pull his own carpet out from the water. He not only cared for himself, but also for his single mother.

The open-minded man he was, Seyed Abdol Ghasem wanted to get his daughter's perspective. My grandmother, Monavar, said that she couldn't make any decision without at least having seen him first. It was too soon to arrange a face-to-face meeting. So they drew up a plan. Next time Mohammad Ali was in the area, they would call my grandmother to come have a look. An uneventful week went by. Until one afternoon, their handmaid was washing clothes in the creek. She saw Mohammad Ali walking from the distance. She quickly ran to the house to call my grandmother to come have a look. Thirteen-year-old Monavar hopped up into the tree for a better view. After he was safely beyond earshot, the handmaid eagerly called up to the tree.

*"So what do you think? Do you give your approval?"*

My grandmother silently slid down from the tree. She wandered her way back up to the house.

*"So... what do you think??"* the handmaid asked itchingly.

No response. My grandmother quickened her steps, as if chasing to catch up with her fate.

*“You sly little one! You’ve grown fond of him, haven’t you? That’s why you’re not saying anything!”*

Monavar pivoted and clarified, “...well, he doesn’t seem like a bad man.”

And they would be married eight-months later. She was fourteen and he was thirty.

Monavar was gem within her generation. And thankfully, her father was enlightened enough to recognize this. Like her older sister, Monavar studied until 6<sup>th</sup> grade.

In preparation for a town hall, their school was asked to prepare a student to recite a verse. The principal nominated my grandmother. Monavar ran home, spilling with excitement to get her father’s permission. At first, he was hesitant since she would speak in front of at least one-hundred people. He was fine with it, but he was afraid of what others would say.

*“The neighbors will think I have no dignity that I let my daughter speak in front of a crowd of strangers”*

With a heavy heart, Monavar told her principal that someone else would need to be selected.

After the school-bell rang, the principal walked home with Monavar. She assured my grandmother that she would ease any worries her father had.

*“With all due respect, sir, your daughter is too talented to be inhibited by fears of what others will say.”*

It didn't take much more than that to convince him. She had spoken the words of his conscience.

Seyed Abdol Ghasem beamed with pride as he sat in the town hall. He saw his little girl standing up on stage.

*“In the name of God, we....”* Monavar looked up to the hundreds of foreign faces standing before her. Her mouth hung open, throat dried up of the words she was supposed to recite.

She felt a familiar hand rest on her shoulder. With the rush of encouragement her principal gave her, she continued.

Monavar would later learn that it was during that town hall that Mohammad Ali had caught a glimpse of her. That memory would plant seeds for him to come pursue her hand in marriage three years later.

Most girls at the time were lucky if they even made it through 6<sup>th</sup> grade. At the time, boys who finished 6<sup>th</sup> grade could begin their training in Islamic theology and become Mullahs!

Seyed Abdol Ghasem had gotten a taste of his daughter's potential, and he knew it would be a shame if she didn't further her studies. He convinced the principle of the local secondary school to accept his daughter's enrollment. Monavar became his only daughter who studied

through 9<sup>th</sup> grade. In the 1940s, excluding the capital city of Tehran, about 5% of Iranian girls residing in rural areas had been given the opportunity to finish secondary school.

And Seyed Abdol Ghasem wasn't ready to stop there. He knew Monavar was more than capable of going to High School. His sons agreed and assured their father that they would make it possible. You see, there was no girl's high school in their small town. Monavar's older brothers were studying and working in Tehran, the capital city 7 hours North.

It was hard for Seyed Abdol Ghasem to say goodbye to his little girl. Monavar comforted a special spot in his heart. He would ask her to read him Rumi's *Masnavi*. She would sing as the other kids played their respective instruments. But he knew the lasting impacts for her future were more important than his fleeting pain. So he wrote a check and said his goodbyes.

With her bedspreads packed, Monavar eagerly awaited the next chapter in her life. She had spent her whole life in Shahreza and was filled to the brim with excitement to see what else was out there. The bits of advice being tossed at her upon departure her were all too hazy. She just wanted to hear the roaring start of the engine.

Suddenly, her older sister's husband appeared.

*"What do we have here? Every time I come over it seems like there's another commotion in this house. Bedspreads getting packed up. Someone leaving. Someone coming. What is it this time?"*

Tucked under her brow, Monavar's gaze pierced at her brother-in-law.



*“Our bright little Monavar is coming back with us to Tebran to finish her studies,”* her brother nonchalantly replied.

*“She’s what?! You’re sending your thirteen-year-old DAUGHTER all the way to Tebran? Ghalat kardi! Not if you want me to stay married into this family.”*

This particular son-in-law was proud to be a self-identified religious extremist.

*“While you’re at it, go bring out a few more bedspreads. If you let her go, I’ll be dropping off your other daughter and her two kids. I’m not staying married into a family that has no respect for female dignity and poise.”*

Seyed Abdol Ghasem didn’t have the energy to argue. He handed his son the check and made his way into the house.

*“If you can convince him, take the check and have safe travels. If you can’t convince him, we’re just going to have to let this one go.”*

My grandmother sniffled as she yanked out any exhilarating dreams from her mind.

Till she passed in 2017, her only regret in life was that she was unable to continue her education. The limitations imposed on her urged her to stop at nothing when it came to her daughters’ education. She swallowed her tears and sent her two precious daughters overseas.

For every one step she was prevented from taking, her daughters leaped two steps instead.

Monavar's fate took shape she blossomed into a pre-teen without school to keep her busy. She occupied herself by crocheting house decor that would accompany her as she began a life with her future husband.

Monavar's fate also took shape as her father began to experience dramatic economic downturn. The oil company he had brought into Shahreza was behind on payments and Seyed Abdol Ghasem owed some important people in Russia quite a bit of money.

On one occasion, one of the Russians came looking for him. It just so happens that he was working alongside their laborer to put up a brick wall. They were creating a partition to offer up one part of their land for sale. As soon as they heard who was at the gate, the laborer urged Seyed Abdol Ghasem to quickly wash up.

*"Hurry up sir! One of the businessmen from Russia is here to see you. Go change your clothes. I'll keep him occupied till you return!"*

Seyed Abdol Ghasem rested the shovel against the half-finished brick wall. He churned his dusty knuckles, spreading the proof of his effort across his skin.

*"There is no need. It is an honor that I work for myself and put in my own effort."*

The Russian took fancy to the plot of land. All debts were absolved.

Thus began Seyed Abdol Ghasem's retirement. He entertained his way out of loneliness by having friends over regularly. Although his finances dwindled, he remained an important figure in Shahreza. This would be confirmed during his funeral procession many years later. The town was filled with black umbrellas, as locals stood under the solemn rain to pay respect.

No longer having a steady source of income, Seyed Abdol Ghasem began to feel the pressure of parenthood. His thirteen-year-old-daughter, Monavar, was no longer pursuing studies. So that left only one other option – marriage – where her womanhood would be put to test.

Our *kotlet* batter is now ready to be put to the test. If we have mixed and massaged it well, it should hold its shape as we fry each one. First, put a large saucepan on the heat. It's important to let the pan heat up first, then to put the oil. This allows for thorough cooking.

Once the oil is hot enough, reduce the heat slightly. Grab a scoop of the mixture and plop it onto the hot oil. Watch out for any popping splatters of oil. Either with your fingers or the back of a spoon, flatten out the *kotlet*. This allows it to cook evenly. And the thinner it is, the deeper it gets fried.

After bubbles have formed around the circumference of the *kotlet* and it seems like a crust has formed underneath, you can flip it with a spatula. Once the second side has cooked,

remove it from the oil. If you have the patience, let it cool slightly. Then have a taste. Adjust the flavor as you would like. Continue on with the full batch.

My grandmother, Monavar, was a professional. She would make an endless amount of *kotlet* for her husband, 10 growing children, and any cousins who were straggling around suppertime. She would have multiple pans going at once, packed to the brim with patties.

She would always use her hands – both to scoop the patties into the pan and to spread them nice and thin. When her first daughter-in-law saw her making *kotlet*, she squeamed with fear.

*“Maman, your hands!”*

Without skipping over a single patty, my grandmother chuckled, *“no my dear – when I am cooking for my children – my hands can never hurt.”*

Regardless of how little choice she had in creating her life circumstances, my grandmother stayed fully committed to her family. She gave them love in all the languages she knew.

She sang skin-curling songs about moonlit love. She told jokes to ease tensions of troubled times. She washed countless clothes in a copper basin upon the fire *manghal*. She stayed bent at the waist while she swept for hours. She baked bread once a week in the *tanoor* oven. She cooked them *kotlet* after *kotlet*. Every time she sat at the *sofreh* for dinner, she would scan everyone’s plates to make sure there was enough food before she took her first bite.

In a twelve-person household running on a single income, priorities needed to be firmly established.

Health, Food, and Education. The three values that were kept in abundance. It wasn't always easy to maintain the right conditions for these values to flourish. So my maternal grandparents had strict regimens.

For studies, peace and quiet were strung throughout the house. The kids would form a "homework line." They sat in rows and the older kids monitored the progress of the younger ones. As soon as homework was done, the kids were liberated to play jacks using small stones or to climb the sour plum trees in the orchard. The radio was off limits unless it was the once-a-week "Johnny Dollar" detective show listened to as a family.

For nourishment, diligent distribution was needed. My grandfather was a bank teller who brought his record-keeping skills into the home. From his workplace, he received monthly food rations that provided staples such as oil, rice, and flour. One of the older sons would borrow a truck and come by to pick up the rations allotted for their family of twelve. My grandfather did strict calculations, leaving my grandmother with exact amounts of cash needed to buy remaining supplies. When the kids would ask for some extra pocket change, my grandmother would "cook the books" to divert some of the food money.

After her marriage, Monavar's life altered dramatically. The bulk of her own childhood, their family had at least one handmaid to help with household tasks. When it came to cooking and cleaning for in this budding family, Monavar was all on her own.

Well, technically she wasn't all alone. Her mother-in-law, Fatemeh Sultan, was there. After she was widowed when her son was seven-months-old, she never left his side.

I imagine in nearly every culture, there are stereotypes of a "Mother-in-Law." This one, Fatemeh Sultan, both fit and broke the mold. She had only one son. And no husband. So when it came time for there to be another woman in Mohammad Ali's life, it is safe to say that Fatemeh Sultan had her fair share of anxieties.

My grandmother tried her best to please her mother-in-law, but she could never erase her crime of being a son-stealer.

Fatemeh Sultan lived with them until the day she passed. She would hardly lift a hand to help with household tasks. She had done her fair share of housework. And after all, this is now the duty of the bride.

Needless to say, she gave my grandmother a hard time. She saw Monavar as a little rich girl who had led a lavish life. Fatemeh Sultan worried that my grandmother would be a careless spender, putting an even greater burden on her son.

She commented on my grandmother's every move.

*"In hame roghan to khak mirizān khoshmāze mishe – If you pour this much oil on dirt, it'll become delicious."*

Unfortunately for Fatemeh Sultan, *kotlet* is a dish that takes quite a bit of oil. Fortunately for Fatemeh Sultan, most of the time, you can get away with using the same oil from start to finish of the frying process. It does depend on how many you're making though. After the *kotlet* are fried, you can put them on a towel to soak up extra grease before serving.

Fatemeh Sultan was not the least bit concerned about oil use for health concerns. Rather, she wanted to conserve resources to lessen the load on her dear son.

### **Fatemeh | Guarding the Future | Beef Liver with Wild Oregano**

Ingredients:

*1/2 kilo of beef liver*

*2 small onions*

*1 handful of crushed wild oregano*

*salt & pepper to taste*

Preparation:

Liver is a divisive food. If you follow a plant-based diet, then it's totally out of the question. But even for those who enjoy eating meat – liver is one of those dishes that either repels or attracts.

Like many cultures, traditional Persian cuisine finds a way to use just about every part of the animal that is killed. We use the head, brain & hooves for *kale-pache* stew, the tongue for

*zaboon* sandwiches, the stomach lining for *sirab-shirdoon* soup, and the heart, kidneys, and liver for skewered *kabobs*. It may sound gross. Or it may sound delicious.

For me, it used to sound gross. I was a strict vegetarian for seven years. My father would chase me down, wielding skewers of liver and heart meat.

Now, for me, most of the time, it sounds delicious. The extended stretches of time I have spent living in Iran have transformed my taste buds. Actually, it is more accurate to say my time in Iran has transformed the way I relate with meat.

I have come to hold a deep-seated respect for the creativity and care required to prepare peripheral parts of an animal. This is especially true when those killing, preparing, cooking, and eating meat are aware that they have ended a life. They own this responsibility. And they repay by relishing in enjoyment and gratitude.

My great-grandmother, Fatemeh Sultan, was cautious when it came to meat consumption. I am not sure how much respect she had for the animal whose meat was eaten. But I do know how much respect she had for my grandfather's pockets where the money to buy that meat came from. And at the time, liver was a much more affordable option compared to other cuts of beef.

Fatemeh Sultan was the mother of my mother's father. She grew up in the small village of Ghavam Abad, near the border between the Yazd, Esfahan, and Fars provinces. Not much is known about her childhood other than that she had one blood brother and a few half-



siblings.

In her late teens, she would come to marry one of her distant cousins, named Seyed Yousof Yousefi. He was from an even smaller neighboring village called Babookan. They soon had their first child, a baby boy they called Mohammad Ali Yousefi.

When Mohammad Ali was seven-months-old, his father faced a sudden and unexpected death. At just nineteen years old, Fatemeh Sultan had already gotten married, given birth, and become a widow.

During that time, especially in the more conservative town of Ghavam Abad, women were not seen as being capable of raising children on their own.

In the case of unfortunate events such as this, option 1 was for widows to move back into their parents' home to get extra support. Fatemeh Sultan didn't have that option – her parents had also left this Earth. Her brother wasn't the greatest support system, and she couldn't even begin to consider reaching out to her half-siblings. So that left option 2 – to get re-married.

Widows were seen as easy targets. Especially ones with young children. Widows were seen as vulnerable, desperate, and willing to tolerate just about anything in exchange of support.

Just after the 40<sup>th</sup> day of her husband's passing, Fatemeh Sultan shoved away shameless men strung outside her home. One man threatened her telling saying she didn't even have a

choice. The local courts would clearly side with a generous man, willing to accept this baggage of her and her baby boy. Fatemeh Sultan's brother also preferred that she be married off – then he wouldn't have to worry about her any longer.

She gazed into the field of possible futures. She followed the threads of what a re-married life could look like. She wove together the realities of her son's many needs. She tied knots around her fears of being incapable to go at this on her own.

Then, she guarded the future she wanted to manifest. And she knew what she had to do.

In the eerie hours before dawn's break, she gathered the most necessary belongings. One bedspread, one shovel, and one pick axe. She strapped them to a donkey, bundled up her baby boy, and set out West. She settled on Shahreza, over 200 km away. It was a larger town that offered more possibilities. Cradling a vision of a better future, she embarked on her journey.

Shahreza would offer her a re-set. The ability to start her life over and prove that she could preserve a fertile future for her son.

Fatemeh Sultan fled her past. She pulled herself out of a situation. She separated to start over.

Most of us are not present for the first stage of preparing this liver dish. Step zero is offering the cow a lavish life filled with abundant greens to chomp on and buddies to call out to. Step

one then is ending this cow's life. Hopefully that is done in the most respectful way possible causing little pain and stress. Step two is to then separate the various parts of the animal.

The liver must be pulled out and separated. True experts are capable of using their multiple senses to identify how healthy the cow was based on studying the liver. The healthier the cow, the healthier and tastier its liver. To gauge liver quality, I've heard of tactics as simple as sniff-tests to elaborate investigations involving salt to identify color change. When consumed in moderation, beef liver is a powerhouse for human health. It contains a suite of essential B-vitamins, iron, copper and protein.

Do your best to find the freshest, highest quality liver possible. Especially if it has been pre-packaged, wash it a few times under cold water. Let it sit for a bit before you begin to slice it.

For this dish, the liver should be sliced into about 3cm wide strips. But the thinner the strips, the better. When the strips are too thick, the core of the meat does not fully cook.

When working with the liver, you're welcome to wear plastic gloves. If you choose skin to skin contact, there is a chance your hands will get slightly bloody. But there's hardly anything that some warm water and soap can't wash off.

Fatemeh Sultan was not afraid the occasional splashes of blood getting on her hands from the liver. And she wasn't afraid of causing little specks of blood to get on others' hands.

One of the punishment tactics she exercised on her rowdy grandsons was to prick their

hands with her upholstery needle. She didn't blink one eye as she saw beady droplets of blood emerge from their thickening skin.

She couldn't be bothered while at her loom. The only downside of having a home studio was the inevitability of the unexpected. When it was just her raising her son, she could easily manage. But after her son got married to Monavar Navab and they started having children, the uncertainty skyrocketed. A household that was gaining a new child every two years definitely brought more distractions than she desired.

After she had settled in Shahreza, Fatemeh Sultan used her savings to buy a loom to weave durable *karbas* fabric. *Karbas* was most commonly used to make sleeping pads, bedspread holders, and poncho-like outerwear.

Fatemeh Sultan would sit for hours on end at her loom. It was her sole source of sustenance. Her handiwork allowed her to gather enough money for her and her son to get by. She was sheepishly relieved after the local well-known merchant, Seyed Abdol Ghasem, began to pay her son's school fees.

Row after row, she held her visions. She held a vision of the fabric she was weaving. She held a vision of what this fabric would become. She held a vision of her growing boy. She held a vision of who he would become. She held a vision of what place could ensure the best possible opportunities for her son's future.

Fatemeh Sultan was a master of migration. Her only attachment was her son. With him in

tow, there wasn't anywhere she wasn't willing to go.

After her son finished 9<sup>th</sup> grade, he had maxed out on the educational opportunities offered in Shahreza. So they packed up their few belongings. This time they traveled in broad daylight with a vehicle. She no longer had anyone or anything to run away from. Just the vision of a better future that she was running toward.

This time they were headed North. Fatemeh Sultan and her thirteen-year-old son traveled about 80 kilometers to the nearest major city of Esfahan. Formerly the capital of the Persian Empire, Esfahan is bountiful – industrially, culturally, religiously, and most importantly educationally.

Seeing education as the ticket to a brighter future, Fatemeh Sultan transplanted her two-person family in new soil. Her son could attend High School in Esfahan and study up until 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

Fatemeh Sultan herself was illiterate. She was the opposite of an intellectual. She was intelligent.

When describing Fatemeh Sultan, my uncle Mehdi (1<sup>st</sup> born) highlights this difference between an intellectual and an intelligent person.

*“An intellectual has spent all their time reading books. Yes, they know many theories. They can talk about things. They can sound smart. But are they actually smart? We don't know! We have to leave them in the*

*middle of nowhere and see if they can find their way home. But an intelligent person? They can always fend for themselves. My grandmother, Fatemeh Sultan, she was intelligent. She was illiterate. But she was the definition of intelligent.”*

Fatemeh Sultan’s intelligence is what brought her to value her son’s education above everything else. She had no time or space to feed superfluous desires.

Liver, or what we call *jigar*, may feed superfluous desires for some. But back in the day when Fatemeh Sultan would prepare *jigar*, it was to fill hungry bellies on a budget low in time and money.

For nearly 3 years, Fatemeh Sultan was responsible for looking after her three oldest grandsons – Mehdi (1<sup>st</sup> born), Hassan (2<sup>nd</sup> born), and Mammad (3<sup>rd</sup> born).

The rest of the family had traveled 150km south to the town of Lordegan. Fatemeh Sultan’s son, Mohammad Ali had been given a promotion. He went from being a bank teller to a branch manager. The only issue was that the family had to relocate to a town with less opportunity than Shahreza. So Mohammad Ali entrusted his mother to care for his three older sons who were settled and satisfied with the secondary school in Shahreza.

Mohammad Ali and his wife Monavar Navab squeezed their five younger kids into the car and re-located to Lordegan. The economical man he was, Mohammad Ali realized it would be a waste to leave so many empty bedrooms in their house back in Shahreza. So they rented it out to a Turkish Khan and his family.

My uncle Hassan recounts how their tenants would host lavish gatherings into the wee hours of dawn. It irked the young teens who were loyal to one thing and one thing only – preparing for their college entrance exam.

Needless to say, the housemate situation didn't warrant a renewal of the leasing agreement.

Fatemeh Sultan was left with her loom and three growing boys. She needed to feed them quickly and cheaply. At the time in the early 1960s, liver was far cheaper than the other cuts of beef. In Iran now in 2020, liver is more than double the price of other cuts of beef.

The great thing about this liver dish is that it is effortlessly filling. It doesn't take much time to prepare. And it can be eaten with rice or bread – two staples in any Persian household.

Before the liver will be cooked, sauté onions. Red, yellow, white – whatever type of onion you can get your hands on. At the time, Fatemeh Sultan would purchase onions from the local merchants who would travel through streets carrying a flat-bed wooden cart. The flaky onion peels would fly around as the merchants zipped through the streets, calling out to the women working in their homes. For women who are responsible for home-duties, these door-to-door merchants are a lifesaver.

Prepare the onion as you like. You can chop them into cubes, slice them into half-circles, or grate them finely.

Allow the saucepan to heat up slightly. Before adding oil – pour the onions into the pan. Stir them around on the heat to allow some of their water to evaporate. When the onion smell begins swirling throughout the kitchen and the skin begins softening, pour in the oil.

Continue sautéing at a higher heat for a few minutes. Then reduce the heat and allow the onions to sizzle slowly. Give them time to soften into their sweetness.

No matter how much time she was given, Fatemeh Sultan never really seemed to sweeten. My uncles tell me of the permanent seriousness strung across her forehead.

Hassan (2<sup>nd</sup> born) recounts a tale from when he was a five-year-old lad. He went with his grandmother to the market. While she was swiftly scrimmaging through the *sabzi* to select the freshest of herbs, Hassan snuck his way off. A golden brown, thickly shelled walnut was calling for his attention. He slipped it into his palm and slid back toward his grandmother who was now finishing her transaction.

Twenty or so minutes later when they had nearly finished their walk back home, Hassan proudly showed Fatemeh Sultan the walnut he had acquired.

*“Ghalat kardi!”* She shouted at her grandson as she grabbed his elbow and pivoted back around.

Hassan silently re-traced his footsteps as he took his grandmother to the exact shopkeeper he had gotten the walnut from.



*“Sir, my grandson has misbehaved and has stolen a walnut from your shop.”*

As Fatemeh Sultan handed the controversial walnut back, the shopkeeper insisted with ease.

*“Oh, this is nothing, Haj Khanoom. Let him enjoy the nut! Here, have another...”*

He charmingly tossed another walnut to my uncle.

Before Hassan could grasp the nut, Fatemeh Sultan stripped it out of his grip.

*“Absolutely not. With all due respect, sir, if we want walnuts, we will pay. Even if it is just one.”*

Fatemeh Sultan clung to her sense of morality as she foresaw the versions of the future where her grandson would either a) become comfortable with stealing or b) believe that life's treasures are just handed out without any effort on our part.

She wanted neither. So she took matters into her own hands.

However, when it came to how she aligned with her own values, Fatemeh Sultan granted herself a bit more flexibility.

She considered herself a devout Shiite Muslim, common of the area she grew up in. Most Muslims observe day-time fasts during the holy month of Ramadan.

For as long as she was well-enough, Fatemeh Sultan would fast for Ramadan. One day, after finishing up her mid-day prayers, she settled down for a smoke.

Fatemeh Sultan enjoyed her fair share of piped tobacco. She claims her relationship with tobacco started all because someone had blown tobacco smoke in her ear to treat an ear infection when she was young.

There was only one problem, though. During the holy month of Ramadan, intoxicants, such as tobacco, are strictly forbidden.

Her non-religious grandson pointed out this important fact as he watched her light up the pipe.

*“Nane Joon! Do you realize that now, all your prayers will be left unanswered? Smoking voids your fasting and Ramadan prayers.”*

*“Well, it’s all up to God. And God knows that I can’t handle more than I’m already doing.”*

Her flexible faith offered her security. It was clear she was exerting a healthy degree of willpower. Fatemeh Sultan was taking responsibility for her fair share of life and the rest was up to God and God only.

To cook the liver, flexible faith comes in handy. There’s only so much we can do to prepare.

We can slice it thinly, prepare a delectable base with the sautéed onions, adjust the heat to the right temperature, and stir with appropriate vigor. We can take responsibility for our fair share. But there is always the inevitability of the unknown – how the dish will actually turn out.

When the onions are ready, turn the heat up. You'll want a temperature that allows for a nice hot pan without risk of burning. When the pan is ready, slide in the liver. Begin tossing the pieces around. Each one should get their fair share of heat. Use a spatula to stir and ensure even cooking. The deep red color of the liver will begin to soften into a fleshy brown. The goal is to get a simultaneous external color change while the internal core is cooking.

When there are still pieces that are dark red, but are on their way to changing color, it is time to add in seasoning.

There is a variety of wild oregano native to Shahreza called *beeni*. Traditionally, this dish is prepared with that strain of oregano. But any variety of the aromatic herb will do. You can use a mortar and pestle, spice grinder, or just your palm to crush the oregano. There may be some hard stems in the herb, so pick those out if you care to.

Sprinkle the oregano liberally across the liver while still stirring. Add in salt and pepper to taste. And shortly after, remove it from the flame. This is a dish that must be served and consumed almost immediately.

If liver is over-cooked, it becomes too tough. If liver is under-cooked, it will maintain a gamy

taste. This is where the flexible faith comes in handy. Find the sweet spot that you feel is right, and trust it.

I gauge readiness by the degree to which my mouth is salivating. If the liver is looking like you want to stick it in your mouth, it is probably ready. After all, a taste test is a highly effective method for gauging readiness!

If being served as an appetizer, pass around the liver right away. Most professional liver-eaters will just pick it out from the bowl and pop it into their mouth. If the liver is a main course, serve it with bread or rice to make it more filling. Eat it while it's hot, or else it will stiffen up.

We stiffen up too, us humans. With the brutalities and devastation witnessed in life, it is almost inevitable. Part of “growing up” and becoming an “adult” is to learn how to harden. It is our defense mechanism to create healthy boundaries and shield ourselves when necessary.

This process of stiffening comes easier for some than others. A delicate art form emerges as we learn when it is time to stiffen and when it is time to soften.

Life threw Fatemeh Sultan an unexpected arrow of trauma when she lost her husband so young. She toughened up in her present to preserve visions of a better future.

Fatemeh Sultan would never meet her, but she shared quite a lot with my aunt Iran

Movahed.

They both lost husbands early in life. They both lived with their children till they died.

They both held onto their private version of faith. And they were both tested on their patience.

### **Iran | Patience | Ground Walnut and Pomegranate Stew**

Ingredients:

*3 cups of walnuts (the oilier the better)*

*1 spoonful of flour*

*2 large onions*

*1/2 cup butternut squash and/ or carrot (optional)*

*6 tablespoons of pomegranate paste (rob-e-anar)*

*1.5 kilos of quail, duck, turkey, or chicken meat (if meat is desired)*

*2-3 cups of water or broth*

*1/4 cup of brewed saffron*

*turmeric, salt & pepper to taste*

Preparation:

To prepare the walnut and pomegranate stew, or what we call *fesenjoon*, one must have quite a bit of patience. Often times, this dish is prepared the night before it is served. Contrary to most leftovers, this is one of those foods that becomes tastier the longer it sits. *Fesenjoon* takes a while for the flavors to settle – or as we say *ja biyoft* – fall into place.

This dish requires even more patience if you are the one who is expected to de-shell the walnuts. My father's eldest sister, Iran Movahed, exuded patience as she devoted stretches of her time to prepare walnuts.

She grew up on her parent's land in Lahoo, Kelardasht in Northern Iran. Her mother, Akaber Teimornejad, carried the impeccable gift of working with the land. Their orchard hosted rows upon rows of walnut, hazelnut, and sour cherry trees.

Summer afternoons were spent suckling down sour cherries until churning stomachs sent one to the outhouse.

Autumn afternoons were spent rummaging through the grass for walnuts and hazelnuts that the trees had surrendered.

The process of selecting nuts requires discernment. Your present self may be tempted to grab every one you find. But your future self will be going through and cracking each one. And cracking one or two hollow nuts may not seem like a big deal. But when this is what you're doing for six hours of the day, one hollow nut avoided is one less moment of disappointment.

Akaber would rely on her kids to help harvest and de-shell walnuts. With blackened hands, they would sit hours upon end to clean out the *maghzi* or brain of the walnut as we call it. It's no coincidence that walnuts are shaped like our brains and are also good for our brains.

Mother Nature's intelligence on display.

Of all her children, Akaber's daughter, Iran, was the most devoted to the walnuts. Long before the others were awake, she would sit beside her mother and help de-shell walnuts to prepare for the breakfast spread. When it is in supply, walnuts are enjoyed alongside sheep's milk feta cheese in bites of flatbread for breakfast.

Anytime Iran would de-shell and clean the walnuts, she would save any tiny, unblossomed walnuts. They were kept in a bowl to behind the lace curtains in their gathering room. Every so often, she would toss aside the dusty curtain and marvel at their cuteness. From a utilitarian view, these walnuts were worthless. For Iran, these served as good luck charms, private tokens of her hard work.

There are numerous ways to de-shell the walnuts. The "new-school" way is to use a nutcracker. The versions with a springed, ridged cup at the top work exceptionally well for walnuts.

The "old-school" way that my Ameh Iran taught me involves a large cloth, two large stones, a knife with a pointed tip, and a few bowls. First, the large cloth is spread out underneath to host this messy process. The shelled walnut is placed between a large flattened stone and another rounded rock which perfectly fits the palm of the hand. One must strike the nut from the perfect angle in order to get a clean opening. It takes a lot of practice to master this. Once the nut is cracked, the sharp pointed edge of a knife is used to wiggle out the walnut's inner brain.

Multiple bowls are used to separate – the shells (which will hopefully later be composted), the perfectly segmented walnut halves, and the bits and pieces that don't look so good. The beautiful walnut halves are used for serving at the breakfast spread and for displays of mixed nuts. The bits and pieces are used for dishes like *fesenjoon* which requires one to grind up the walnut. Appearances matter – but only sometimes.

My aunt Iran was quite the fashionista back in the day. She cared for her appearance and kept up with the Western-inspired fashion trends. During the 50s and 60s, the country of Iran looked quite different than it does now under the Islamic regime.

The first time I saw old family photos of my aunt Iran, I was shocked. I had always known her to be a more conservative, modestly dressed woman. Then when I saw evidence of her flashing skin and rocking heels, I had to call her out on it.

*“Ameh Iran! You used to show your legs in public and now you won't even show us your hair?!”*

*“The times were different”* she responded, without letting her sly poker face slip.

My aunt, Ameh Iran, was the first-born of my father's six siblings. It's important to note that she was also the grandmother to the man I am now married to.

Yes, that makes my husband and I blood related. His grandmother is my aunt. His mother is my cousin. He is the son of my cousin. He is technically my first-cousin once removed. No, it was not an arranged marriage. There was a spontaneous upsurge of emotions and we



intentionally chose to pursue a relationship. And no, I don't think it's weird that we're blood related. Yes, we have gone through genetic testing and there will be no issue for any future children we may wish to have.

Now that that is straightened out, let's move on with the story of Iran Movahed – the woman who holds two roles in my heart and the recipe for *fesenjoon* – my all-time favorite Persian stew.

My husband says it's no coincidence that Iran Movahed was given the name she was. Like the country of Iran, she has had a complicated life history.

*Fesenjoon* may appear like a complicated dish given the layered preparation and cooking time. But I assure you, it's worth moving past your fears and actually giving it a shot. After all, your *fesenjoon* cooking skills can only begin to improve when you've at least made it once.

First start by finely chopping one of the onions. If you have access to a motor-operated food processor, it will be your best friend for this dish. This is one of the rare times when I advocate motorized cutting over muscular chopping. Puree the onion finely. Some insist that *fesenjoon* is a dish where you're not supposed to see any trace of onion. But you sure can taste it!

Prepare a large, wide-bottomed, pot on medium high heat. Let the empty pot heat up nicely. Then, pour in the onion and begin stirring continuously. Let the water from the pureed onions evaporate entirely. When you notice the onion starting to dry up, drizzle in some oil

and reduce the heat slightly. Keep cooking the onions until they begin to change in color. Sprinkle in some turmeric at this stage.

By now, the aroma of the onions should be filling the air. Tears may begin to stream down your eyes, but this is not to worry you. This is a normal reaction. It happens to me quite often. I've been told it runs in the family.

My Ameh Iran, was similarly sensitive. The slightest whiff of onions would send silent tears streaming down her pale cheeks. I think it's because she always had a *boghzi* in her throat, a lump of tears waiting to erupt into the world.

Her difficult life quickly trained her to armor up. She protected her vulnerable heart against life's unexpectedly cruel crashes. In daylight, Ameh Iran rarely let her emotions slip. Unless she was watching a soap-opera or Bollywood movie. Underneath the cloak of the protagonist's story, she emptied her heavy heart.

In moonlight, when no waking ears could hear, she unleashed a monsoon of tears. Until he was six-years-old, my husband slept with his grandma. This was a win-win-win situation. He got to cuddle up with a symbol of devoted love, his grandmother got to escape her internalized loneliness, and his parents got to enjoy the evenings to themselves.

There was only one problem – my husband was a much lighter sleeper than his grandmother realized. Bedtime stories were told and goodnights exchanged. Iran would wait till her grandson's breathing fell into a steady, heavy rhythm. She would then reach deep for the

rusty key strung around her neck and unlock her chest open. Soft whimpers would unwind until she herself fell asleep.

It took my husband a few years to muster up the courage to confront her about her secret. When he was five, he came up with a brilliant idea.

*“Mamani Iran, if you keep crying at night, I won’t sleep with you anymore. And neither of us wants that, am I right?”*

Her heartbroken eyes widened into a slight smile as she promised her first grandson she would concede to his wishes.

She managed to keep it in for just a few nights, but the wailing out-willed her.

Ameh Iran had stale, unresolved pain. The Earth’s gravity got her right from the start.

Iran was the first born of 13-year-old Akaber Teimornejad and 15-year-old Davood Movahed. Life’s lines began to quickly imprint on her face as she inherited more than her own weight in responsibility.

Between breaks of helping her mother in the kitchen, she played with her siblings. No baby dolls were needed for make-pretend.

Each year added to her life brought on a new duty. Iran was her mother’s second-in-

command, tending to the home, the kids, the cooking, the garden, and the farm animals.

It wasn't hard because it was all she knew. She stayed busy. And her life became busier as she attended school.

Iran studied through the 9<sup>th</sup> grade. She was just beginning to blossom into a young adult as the suitors began coming for her hand in marriage. Her father, Davood, could turn most of them away easily. But when Davood's eldest cousin, Amoo Shokrollah, came on behalf of his son in pursuit of Iran, Davood's hands were tied.

His daughter was eighteen and had learned just about everything there was to know about caring for a home. Ideal bride material. Promises were given. Arrangements were made.

There was only one problem – Iran didn't want to get married.

*"Why do you want to send me off to go slave away at some other man's house? Wouldn't you rather I stayed right at home? At least you'd be getting the benefit of my hard work!"*

Her father had given his word. And the Movaheds are famous for stubbornness. There was no way he was going back on his promise or even asking his cousin to wait a bit till she was ready. This was his eldest cousin's son. And respect is always given to elders.

*"It is done and over with."*

Her mother offered stiff support. Akaber told tales of how her own marriage was arranged without her awareness.

*“It’s just how things are done.”*

She assured her daughter that the wedding would be extravagant and the whole town would be present. And besides, her future father-in-law was the caretaker for the Shah’s palace in the North. Iran would get tastes of luxury that her mother never had.

Iran watched her future form as she walked alongside Najib, her now husband. She veiled her frustrations. Her faith-filled heart begged her to wait before jumping to conclusions. He might actually be a good man. After all, God was orchestrating it all for a reason.

It wasn’t just emotions that Ameh Iran was good at masking. When it came to cooking, she had tons of tricks up her sleeve that very few people were privy to learning.

When making *fesenjoon*, after sauteeing the onions, most people go straight to the walnuts. But not Ameh Iran. She had learned a secret step from her mother – the use of butternut squash and/or carrots.

*Fesenjoon* can become quite sour, given the use of the pomegranate paste. Adding a naturally sweet, root-vegetable like butternut squash or carrot can help balance out the upcoming sour addition of the pomegranate. And plus, it helps thicken the stew.

If using butternut squash, it's recommended to cook it first. Steam it first, and then puree it. If using carrots, there's no need to cook it first. But you can if you'd like. Pop it into the food processor and puree it as finely as possible.

If you won't be using meat, I recommend saving a few large chunks of butternut squash. Steam them till they are just barely beginning to soften. Just for a minute or so to take it out of its total rawness. Then save those to the side to add into the stew toward the end. My Ameh Iran never did this, but I've found it to be a great adaptation for a plant-based version of *fesenjoon*.

Scoop out the pureed root vegetable with a rubber spatula. Once pulverized, the carrot or butternut squash should be about half the amount of the onion. We want to keep it subtle, remember? It's a family secret. Sautee together with the onion over a medium-low flame.

Remember I said the food processor will be your best friend for this dish? It has most definitely come in handy so far. And it will be of great service as we move onto preparing the walnuts.

If you took part in the harvesting and de-shelling of the walnuts, this stage may cause a mixture of pride and anguish.

Gather the necessary amount of walnut bits and pieces. Given how much work went into preparing them, it may be difficult to part ways with an appropriate amount of walnut. But it

wouldn't be *fesenjoon* without the walnuts. This isn't the time to be frugal. You'll want to use the oiliest, fattiest walnuts you can find.

Before starting the food processor, I've learned to add a spoonful of flour. This helps initially keep the oils condensed and then allows for a slow release of fattiness as the stew cooks for hours.

Puree the walnuts until they form a crunchy paste. Some people keep going until it becomes nearly powder-like. But I like when it's still a little chunky so the occasional crunch can come under the teeth.

The quality of the walnuts will reveal themselves at this stage. The fatter the nut, the more they will stick together and reveal a layer of oil around themselves. Use the rubber spatula to scoop the fatty lining and every singly nutty crumb into the pot.

There are times for frugality and there are times for extravagance. Preparing *fesenjoon* is one of those times when we embrace the spirit of abundance and use the most exquisite walnuts.

Iran was often criticized for being frugal. Her stinginess was added to the list of things that made her a "typical Movahed." Stubbornness and stinginess.

What her critiques missed was Iran's behind-the-scenes behavior. When the time was appropriate, her hands and heart were open to giving money.

My husband tells tales of school field trips where he could relish in the luxuries of buying souvenirs and snacks to munch on. All because his Mamani Iran had given him *kehargi*, spending money. A decade later when my husband was completing his mandatory military service, once again, his Mamani Iran would slip him pocket money.

The tendency to conserve money may be written into the DNA of Movaheds as some family members joke. But Ameh Iran learned to save out of necessity.

Her life with Najib started off simple and sweet. He was the principal of a High School in Tehran. They would visit their families up in the North nearly every weekend. Najib's father oversaw the Shah's summer-time vacation palace just one village over from Iran's parent's home in the North. Occasional weekends would grant them the luxury of perusing through the palace gardens.

Their two-person household quickly changed as they had their first child. Iran's first labor was infamously painful. She was in pain for three days and three nights until she finally gave birth to their son at home.

She had helped her mother raise her five siblings, so she had lots of experience with babies after their arrival. But she had never practiced what happens during the child's arrival.

At the time, men were not even the least bit involved – let alone informed – on the musky trials of childbirth. Husbands entrusted the flocks of women who surrounded their wives.

After all, the uterus hosts an ancient ocean of feminine wisdom.



Wild rue seeds, *espan*, were burned to cleanse the atmosphere. Skewers of onion were placed above the mother's head to capture microbes. A prayer-filled bathing ritual was held ten days after the birth. *Gheymagh* was cooked to offer the new mother revitalization.

Practices passed between generations kept Iran well as she began her journey into motherhood. She came to have three children. One boy and two girls. She adorned them with hand-knit bonnets and home-sewn clothes.

Iran played her role well as her husband played his. Najib loved hosting gatherings that oozed with full-bellied laughter and sizzling intellectual conversations.

The men would take their position on the balcony, only getting up when called in for dinner time. The women would take their position in the kitchen, only leaving to serve – eat – then gather dinner. And the children would take their endless positions while crawling, running, skipping, and jumping between the adult's legs.

These gatherings took a toll on the wife who cycled through cleaning, cooking, preparing, serving, and cleaning once again.

These gatherings took a toll on the husband who cycled through working, shopping, inviting, entertaining, and working once again.

But for Iran and Najib – it was worth the effort. Their hospitality kept the families close.

And they began the trend of rotating whose home the dinner parties were held at as not to overburden any one couple. The women would divide and conquer dishes and carry pots of food to one another's houses in cloth-wrapped *boghches*.

*Fesenjoon* is one of those dishes that is easy to carry between houses. It can be prepared well in advance. And it becomes yummiier the longer it sets.

Once the walnuts have been ground, it is time to add them into the sautéing mixture. It is important to find the perfect temperature for this. You want the heat to be hot enough to allow the walnuts to get slightly toasted. And you want it to be low enough to prevent the walnut from getting any hint of a burnt taste. After you settle on an appropriate temperature, scoop in the ground walnut.

The trick is to keep stirring it so every bit of the mixture gets its fair share of surface heat. This is where having a wide-bottomed pot comes in handy.

Continue stirring and turning around this pasty mixture until the color begins to darken. This color change should begin to happen after 3-5 minutes of stirring, depending on how high you have the heat. A roasted, earthy oily smell should begin to emerge from the walnuts – an aroma full of delectable comfort. Enjoy it while it lasts.

This next stage can cause a bit of panic. We are about to take this elegantly roasted mixture of earthy goodness and turn it into a questionable sloshy solution. I promise, this is part of the process.

Once the walnuts have been toasted and have combined thoroughly with the onion mixture, it is time to add the liquid. You can use water or a broth of your choice. Any broth will add more flavor, but water will be just fine since this dish has so much flavor on its own. Start with about 2 cups and begin stirring intentionally. The goal is to create a new consistency that marries the walnut mixture into the liquid. It will take time, but it is worth the effort. Slow, patient strokes with a wooden spatula work well.

The end result at this stage should be a thick, creamy mixture with the occasional floating chunks of walnut. But you want to make sure there are no clumpy unmixed bits hiding in the corners. Patient, consistent stirring is the way to go.

Once you've achieved an even mixture, turn up the heat. You'll need to babysit this mixture with full attention at this point. Consistently stir the mixture so it does not crust at the bottom. The goal is to have the temperature high enough so that the mixture begins to boil.

When it begins to bubble, keep mixing. Make sure to stick the spatula all the way in and pull along the bottom of the pot. You don't want any crust to form at the bottom. You want it to get hot enough that it starts to foam. Continue stirring until a layer of foam starts forming and the mixture is gurgling.

At this stage, it is time to turn the heat way down. If you've got time to cook this, you can keep it on the lowest temperature. If you're feeling a bit more pressed for time, you can keep it on a medium-low.

If you choose a higher temperature, you'll have to stay near the pot, stirring every 2-3 minutes or so. If you choose a lower temperature, you'll still have to stay near, but stir every 15 minutes or so. Put the lid on and let it sit. The goal is to let the stew cook for at least 2 hours over a low heat until the color begins to darken.

At this stage, it is a bit hard to believe that this awkward, sloshy mixture will become the rich, thick stew. But we know, things aren't always as they seem. With time, all will be settled.

If you're planning on having meat in the stew, now is a good time to begin to prepare. As we do with nearly every Persian dish, start with onion. Chop up the onion as you wish and sauté it till it's a nicely translucent. Add in the turmeric and any other spices you like to use to create a base flavor for the meat. I like to use a bit of oregano, nutmeg, cinnamon, and cumin.

Bird-meat with bone is commonly used in this dish. If you can get your hands on fresh quail or duck, that's the original way Northerners will prepare *fesenjoon*. Most often, I use chicken drumsticks since they stay nice and intact after being cooked in the stew. Peel off the skin, rinse, strain, and begin to sauté them with the onion-spice mixture.

Some people are fine with the meat getting all shredded and soft when it's in the stew, and others prefer to prepare in a way that the meat stays intact on the bone. If you prefer the shredded style, then there's really nothing special to do other than cook the meat however

you like. If you'd like the meat to stay intact on the bone, there are some precautions to take. We want the core to get cooked without getting too soft. I start with the lid on for a few minutes with breaks to stir the pieces around.

Once the core seems to be getting cooked, I somewhat sear the meat. It helps to use a friendly amount of oil and toss the drumsticks around so that they get a nice thick crust on them. When the core has been cooked and the skin seared, take them off the heat, and put them aside. Later, when the meat is added into the stew, it will get its final merging of flavors.

Meat definitely adds a primal satisfaction to the dish. But the plant-based version with butternut squash chunks is its own kind of delicious. I advocate for trying both ways.

I don't think my Ameh Iran would ever be willing to serve a non-meat *fesenjoon*. She would often use very little meat and bony bits of the bird. But no meat at all? I doubt it.

She grew up with farm animals and had learned the methods for swiftly killing ducks, roosters, and chickens. Iran didn't enjoy the process, but she knew how it was done.

Her experience preparing animal meat came in handy during the five-day stretch of fasting and ritual gatherings in Winter, sacred to the *able-hagh* spiritual community. Day-time fasts end with collective feasting. The meal consumed is sacredly simple – steamed meat served beside plain rice cooked with animal lard. Those cooking the meal hold intentions in their hearts and pray during each stage of preparation.

Iran's faith came from being raised in a household devoted to this ancient spiritual tradition. The family held devout beliefs from the *able-bagh* faith, which loosely translates to "people of the Truth".

The premises are potently simple.

Each person holds one drop of God. When we gather in sacred circles, this energetic presence of God is more palpable. Any space can be used for spiritual gatherings. It is the quality of the prayers and intentions that determines its holiness. How we live our life now is how we practice our faith. We are not awaiting judgment in any Heaven or Hell. Our spirits come and go from this Earth through a cycle of reincarnation.

An *able-bagh* person shows their faith by participating in every space of their life with honesty and authenticity. Ameh Iran was a testament of devotion. Year after year, she would devote herself to being head-chef of preparing the vowed food.

A makeshift kitchen is created in parking garages using single-burner gas stoves or outdoors using metal platforms and fire. I continue to be amazed by the skills of these female elders.

I struggle to prepare a perfect pot of rice for a dinner party of 10. Yet these women manage to cook enough rice for 200 people without hesitation.

Drawing on inter-generational wisdom, they carefully inspect the intensity of the fire,

saltiness of the boiling rice, and tenderness of the meat.

Her small physique never once stopped her from volunteering to host the 5-nights of rituals and feasts. Without fail, until the year she was bed-ridden, Ameh Iran held these gatherings at her home. Six decades of lugging magnesium pots the size of a coffee table, waking up at dawn to begin preparations, cooking until the steam caused all her baby hairs to curl out beneath her headscarf, helping serve for those dining in and for those taking portions home for loved ones, and washing dish after dish – spoon after spoon. And all the meanwhile, maintaining her daytime fasts.

It would bring good energy to the home. And it was a tangible way she could show her devotion. An easy way to embrace her community and demonstrate to God just how devoted she was.

*Fesenjoon* is the dish of devotion. It requires a seemingly contradictory combination of heightened attention and patient passivity. At this point, after nearly two hours of being occasionally stirred over a low flame, the stew should have begun to darken and a layer of oil from the walnuts should have begun to form.

The stew is ready to receive the pomegranate paste. In English, pomegranate paste can also be called pomegranate syrup or pomegranate molasses. It can be found in most Middle Eastern grocery stores. Since I prefer *fesenjoon* that is more on the tart side, I go for pomegranate paste with no added sugar. You can always make it on your own by cooking down pomegranate juice for hours. We are fortunate to have consistent access to homemade

paste from trustworthy sources.

In Iran, sour things are consumed like sweet things are in the United States. We have a diverse array of sour treats that make my mouth water just writing about. Without fail, every I'm using pomegranate paste, a separate spoonful is enjoyed on its own as a sour treat. In fact, I just got myself a spoonful since writing about it without tasting it was torture.

If the pomegranate paste you're using is very thick, you can use a bit of boiled water and thin it out in a cup before adding it to the stew. If it is homemade, you may also want to run your hand through and soften out any crusty chunks.

At this stage, I would recommend adding at least 4 tablespoons of pomegranate paste. If you're worried it will get too sour, you can add less. More can always be added later.

Some add sugar into the later stages of the stew since they prefer a sweet *fesenjoon*. But that is not my style at all.

Our family likes *fesenjoon* to be *malas*, a taste that straddles the line between sour and sweet. This *malas* taste can be achieved by using the carrot/butternut squash at the beginning, a sizable amount of pomegranate paste, and letting the stew cook for hours and hours.

There's something about that fine line between sour and sweet. The closest word in English is "bittersweet" but it's actually not the same since bitterness is not a treasured flavor. In



Iran, sour is a treasured flavor. *Malas* is used to describe that goldilocks perfect middle point between sour and sweet where both flavors are simultaneously toned down and accentuated

My Ameh Iran's life was the definition of *malas*. The sweet in her life came from living with her two daughters and their precious families. She treasured her time with her grandchildren and allowed her heart to be melted by their every move.

The sour in her life came from the numerous heartbreaks and tragedies she experienced. But wait – didn't I say sour is a treasured flavor in Iran? So why am I comparing it to sorrow?

Iranian culture is full of heart. We are an emotional people who pluck at the many tonalities our own heartstrings. We savor sorrow. We self-flagellate, both literally and metaphorically.

It reminds me of the Goo Goo Dolls lyric from Iris – “you bleed just to know you're alive.”

The Iranian people carry a heavy load of inter-generational trauma. A people with a 100,000 year old civilization, once hosting one of the largest empires in history, now belong to a nation tossed around with economic sanctions and travel bans.<sup>38</sup> And that doesn't even begin to address the grief that comes with wide-spread loss of cultural heritage after the Muslim conquest of Iran.

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<sup>38</sup> <https://www.ancient.eu/Persia/>

I do not have space here to go into my hypotheses behind the Iranian people's multi-layered subconscious sorrow. It is important to know that we are a people who have come to take pleasure in allowing ourselves to bask in just the right amount of pain.

Just like how the right amount of sour can really hit the spot.

My Ameh Iran didn't choose the amount of pain brought into her life. But she did choose how much she ruminated on it – a reaction hard to avoid when it feels like life is torturing you.

Ameh Iran had come to appreciate the small beauties in the life she was living. She was 37 and had a nice rhythm going with her three kids. She lived close to her brother and her sister's family. They would gather often. Keeping one another company was a necessary survival strategy since it was during wartime. From 1980 -1989, Iran was in was with Iraq.

It didn't help that her son had been drafted and was on the front lines of the battlefield. Iran and Najib had banned the radio in their home since they didn't want to be tempted by the spiral of panic that came with ingesting the news.

One evening, they were all gathered at Iran's sister's house. The women were chatting in the kitchen while the men were settled in the family room. Somehow the radio got turned on. After strings of propaganda from the Islamic regime, a breaking headline was announced.

The base on the Southwestern border had been flooded with missiles. Their son was in

active duty at that same exact base.

Najib's fragile heart couldn't handle it. He immediately had a stroke.

The wailing wife was pushed aside. Iran's older brother Behrooz, a medical doctor, kept everyone calm as Najib was rushed to the hospital.

His heart had stopped. After a few shocks with the defibrillator, his heart regained consciousness.

Behrooz ran into the hall where the panicked family awaited.

*"He's alive! His heart is beating again!"*

His words shot into Iran's consciousness and jolted her back into awareness. She too had been slipping off the edge of lucidity.

They gripped one another with gratitude to God who saved this husband – this father – this uncle – this brother-in-law – this gentleman.

Moments later, Behrooz returned into the hall with heavy steps. He averted eye contact as he prepared to switch roles now into the bearer of dreadful news.

*"He didn't make it. It was a false recovery. His heart was too weak."*

Now, 36 years later, many ascribe his weak heart to the regular consumption of meat, alcohol, and cigarettes.

Love should probably be added to that list.

It was love for his son that jolted him into a debilitating state of care.

And that wasn't even the biggest plot twist. While the family switched into mourning mode, their soldier son, Ramin, was on his way for a surprise visit. He intentionally hadn't called home. They had a few days off and he was on his way back to Kelardasht.

While in the back seat of the cab, Ramin noticed an unusual amount of traffic in the town square. A horde of women and men cloaked in black relayed between cars to make their way into the alley leading to the graveyard.

*"Who has died? Can you read the name on the banner?"*

*"Najibollah Movahed"* – the driver squinted as he stammered through the name's pronunciation.

And that's how Ramin came to learn about his father's death.

Life has scorched the veins of faith circulating through this family.

The part of me that wants an explanation for the unparalleled hardship my aunt endured still struggles to find resolution.

No matter is created nor destroyed. When something is burnt, it gives off traces of what it was.

My Ameh Iran knew these natural laws well as she lived with her husband's residue in her every waking step. She also had experience intentionally burning matter to strip traces of its essence.

Another family secret for how we make *fesenjoon* is to burn a pure iron spoon, stick, or spatula to infuse the dish with maroon, metallic nutrients. Since *fesenjoon* is a naturally fatty dish because of the walnuts, it is a great opportunity to absorb necessary minerals. It also adds a deep brown color which enhances the *fesenjoon's* mouth-watering quality.

The iron must be heated up till it is scolding red. It is smart to hold it using a cloth or mitt. Once the iron is nicely burnt, it can begin to release traces of its minerals into the stew. Stick it in the pot. You'll know it's hot enough since you'll hear the sizzle as the iron makes contact with the light brown stew. The process of re-heating the iron should be repeated a few times.

If using a magnesium pot like the ones my aunt would use, you can easily drop the iron into the pot. When using a nonstick pot, one has to get a bit clever. My uncle has engineered this

trick using a skewer and a loop to hang the iron without damaging the nonstick material of the pot.

Let the iron sit in the stew as it continues to cook over low heat for another few hours.

Leave the lid open. Every 20 minutes or so, pay the stew a visit. At this point, thin layers of crust will begin forming along the insides of the pot. Use a spatula to scrape and stir into the stew.

After a few more hours of cooking, the *fesenjoon* will totally surprise you by how dark it can become. You can also choose the option to let the partially cooked stew sit in the fridge overnight and then resume its cooking the following morning.

After about six hours of cooking, the *fesenjoon* will have a nice thick layer of oil from the walnuts. *Dare ja miyofte* - it is falling into place. About 2 hours before serving, raise the heat underneath the pot and allow the mixture to come to a boil. Taste it. If you'd like to add more pomegranate paste do so now. Or if you prefer it on the sweeter side, you can add a spoonful or two of sugar.

Pour in the cooked meat or the par-boiled butternut squash. We want to give it enough time to mix in with the flavors of the stew. But in my family, we like the meat to stay intact on the bones. Once the meat/squash has boiled together with the stew for a few minutes, turn down the heat.

At this point, I've learned a trick from a friend. Saffron. Saffron is more expensive than gold.

So, depending on who you are, it doesn't get used often. My aunt would never use saffron in her *fesenjoon*. Saffron was reserved for the rare dishes that require the vibrant orange aroma and taste and cooked only for guests. But I find that it adds a hard-to-pinpoint finger-licking richness to the dish.

If you can get your hands on some saffron, I recommend using it. Pull a few threads and place them into a mortar and pestle. If you don't have one, you can just a sugar cube pressed against a small bowl to grind the spice. Once it is nicely ground, it's time to brew it. If you have some time to spare, place an ice cube into a cup with the saffron and place it near the stove. This slow melt allows the saffron to really let its flavors loose. If you're more pressed for time, a splash boiling water can be poured onto the ground saffron. Let it sit and then add an ice cube till it melts. Once a deep ruby color is achieved, it is ready to be poured into the stew.

Allow it to cook for a bit longer until you've got a nice, coagulated thick stew. It's ready to be served. Pour it into a beautiful platter and feel free to decorate it with fresh pomegranate seeds. After so many hours of cooking, it deserves the attention.

*Fesenjoon* is a dish that tests our patience and devotion. We are asked to give attention at exactly the right points and otherwise let it unfold at its own pace. My Ameh Iran embodied patience, not only as she prepared her famous *fesenjoon*, but as she paced herself through the marathon of life.

Iran Movahed was patient with her life. And she was patient with her death.

On September 6<sup>th</sup> 2017 she was diagnosed with kidney cancer. She made her slow exit from this world, taking time to soak up every last drop of life before she left. Thankfully, my husband and I had our legal marriage ceremony in December 2017 while she was still lucid enough to bask in the joy of our union.

She was bed ridden from late October 2017 till September 2018 when she finally passed. Her eldest daughter, Ramesh Movahed, inherited her mother's patience as she offered around-the-clock care.

Ameh Iran was silent in her life and in her passing. She slipped slowly, just barely allowing the world around her to notice.

During family gatherings, she could often be found in the corner, absorbing everyone's interactions with prudent attention. She listened loudly and spoke softly. Ameh Iran held space, a gift which she passed onto her daughter, Ramesh.

### **Ramesh | Holding Space | Stuffed Eggplants**

Ingredients:

*5-7 Japanese/Chinese eggplants (long neck, wide bottom)*

*1/4 kilo of ground beef and/or textured soy protein*



*3 large onions*

*a few cloves of garlic*

*1 small tomato*

*1 1/2 cup of tomato paste/ sauce*

*1/4 of fresh lemon juice or sour grape juice (ab ghoore)*

*2-3 cups of water or broth*

*your preferred spices (I use turmeric, coriander seed, nutmeg, cinnamon, cumin, oregano, rosemary, paprika, salt, & pepper)*

Preparation:

These stuffed eggplants stole my heart the first time I tasted them at my mother-in-law, Ramesh Movahed's house. She made them for a dinner party, which meant that they were one of four other main dishes served. But the second I had a spoonful of the eggplant, I was mesmerized. No other dish could steal my taste buds the way these eggplants had.

Eggplants are a fascinating vegetable. If you give them the chance, they will soak up anything they're surrounded with.

I've learned the importance of letting the eggplant dry out in some way. This is particularly helpful if you'll be frying the eggplant and want to prevent it from absorbing the entire bottle of oil in the process. The process of drying out the juices helps remove any bitterness in the eggplant as well.

There are multiple ways to do this. After it is peeled, the eggplant can be soaked in warm salt water for 10-20 minutes, then strained. The eggplant can be cut and salted and left to “sweat” for at least 45 minutes. The eggplant can be left in the sun to bathe away its bitterness. Some people even flash boil the eggplant for a minute or so before frying or baking it.

Depending on the dish, how much time I have, and how I’m feeling, I do at least one if not two of the aforementioned methods. I highly recommend using some method to let the eggplant sit. If the eggplant isn’t given time to “sweat,” it won’t be able to absorb all the other delicious flavors you’re using in the dish since it’ll get too full of oil.

My mother-in-law, Ramesh absorbs everything, just like these eggplants. She is hyperaware. Incredibly perceptive. They say the sixth sense of a mother is strong. Ramesh must have a ninth sense because her intuition is off the charts. Maybe it’s because she’s been in perpetual motherhood mode for the last 30 years.

In 1989, Ramesh gave birth to her first son, Parham – my husband. At the time, she wasn’t a full-time mother. She was working as a secretary at her uncle’s gynecology practice. Ramesh worked around, over, above, and under the clock. She was actually at the office when her contractions begin. This is when it pays off to be working at a gynecologists office.

When Parham was a few months old, Ramesh eagerly went back to work. She was at ease since she could drop Parham off downstairs with her mother. Their routine offered Ramesh a sense of independence and purpose, Parham a sense of devotional love and patience, and

Grandmother Iran a sense of company and vitality.

This mutually beneficial dynamic worked for five years until Ramesh had her second son, Arman in 1994. At first she wanted to leave him with her mom and go back to work. But it wasn't at all possible. Arman was a totally different child than Parham.

Parham was independent, would play on his own, sit quietly with adults, and satiate his own curiosities. Arman on the other hand needed constant attention, cried through the nights, was constantly hungry, and wanted to be strapped to his mama.

So Ramesh stopped working outside the home and switched to being a full-time homemaker. She had a smooth rhythm going and was beginning to find just enough time for herself as the boys went off to school. Then in 2002, her younger sister, who lived on the floor above them, had her first kid. A little girl, Negin.

Excitement flooded the building as the family got a new doll to play with. After 6-months of paid maternity leave, Ramesh's sister went back to work as a midwife in the hospital. Since Ramesh was a homemaker, she volunteered to care for Negin. This left Ramesh to experience motherhood all over again. Because for her, there is no difference between her sister's child and her own. In fact, the little girl Negin kept confusing her aunt as her mom since she was with Ramesh most of the day.

The children were growing up. The family was supported by their three-story community living. Grandmother on the first floor. Ramesh and family on the second. Younger sister and family on the third. It also helps that the pair of sisters married a pair of brothers. So the

“sisters-in-law” are actually blood sisters. And the “brothers-in-law” are actually blood brother. Talk about strong family bonds.

By this point, everyone followed their rhythm, everyone had their place. But the pattern was broken when Ramesh’s sister unexpectedly got pregnant again – 15 years after her first born. In 2017, the mischievous little elf Radin was born. And Ramesh began her fourth round of motherhood.

Day after day, Ramesh practices the art of *del dadan*, of giving her heart and holding space for others. She recognizes the unique burden placed on each one of us and often takes more than her fair share of responsibility. For her loved ones, she is willing to do just about anything.

In the 38-degree Celsius weather of Tehran in July, she will walk with little Radin to a nearby manmade lake so he can throw rocks into the water. It’s his favorite time which Ramesh got him into. Sometimes, she lugs along 10 kilos of fava beans or green peas to de-shell while Radin plays. They both return, dripping with sweat, but delighted to have gotten time outdoors.

Once the eggplant has had time to “sweat” off a bit, we can prepare to fry it. For this dish, we cut the eggplants horizontally once (or twice if they’re super long). And then we cut a slit into its belly. Careful not to cut the slit all the way vertically or all the way in deeply. Leave about ¼ inch on the top and bottom. We’re looking to create the perfect pocket to be filled with a delectable mixture.

Heat a large nonstick pan. When hot, pour in a decent amount of oil. I tend to start off with less and then add in as needed. But Ramesh just goes for it and pours as much as her experience tells her to. With a medium-high heat, begin to fry the eggplant. Allow it to settle into the oil for some time before flipping it around. We want it to get cloaked with a thin brown cooked coat. It doesn't need to be cooked all the way though since the dish will also go in the oven.

If you're feeling up for the challenge, while the eggplant is frying, begin to prepare the stuffing mixture.

For the stuffing, you can use ground beef, textured soy protein, or a combination of both. In Iran, meat has become very expensive. Many families use this trick of using mainly textured soy protein combined with however much ground beef they can afford to add a bit of meaty flavor. If you follow a plant-based diet, use only the soy protein. If you can afford and want exclusively ground beef, go for just the beef. I'll offer the process of creating a combination version but please adjust accordingly.

As in nearly every Persian dish, we start with onion. Prepare the onion how you wish. If you like onion pieces to show in the dish, chop it into small squares or as we say in Persian *negini* – into gems. If you prefer the onion be hidden but add bountiful flavor, stick it in the food processor for a few seconds or shred it using a grater. Ramesh tends to use the processor to chop nearly everything she's cooking with. This serves to main function. First, it saves her

heaps of time. And second, she has some picky eaters in her extended family who don't like to see the base ingredients of what they're eating. She's highly accommodating.

Allow the pan to heat up entirely. Pour in the onion. Allow its water to steam off first while stirring continuously. Ramesh taught me this method for preparing the onions. It allows the onion to get partially cooked before needing the use oil. This strategy results in softer, sweeter sautéed onions. Once you have poured in the oil, reduce the heat slightly. We don't want to burn these sweet onions into bitterness.

In Persian, when someone becomes bitter, we say they hold *kine* – stale pain – in their hearts. When this pain is left to simmer, it can lead people to use bizarre tactics such as passive aggressiveness or ignoring someone entirely and being *ghabr* with them for days, weeks, months, or years even.

Ramesh often confesses to her inability to stay *ghabr* and ignore someone for extended periods of time. Her sister on the other hand can go weeks intentionally avoiding someone.

*“I just can't. It drives me mad after a few days. If I have a problem with someone, I have to solve it. Whether that means solving it in myself or actually talking to the person.”*

Ramesh's perceptivity subjects her to absorbing the subtlest emotional waves – whether in herself, or in others. When she inherits a suspicion, judgment, dissatisfaction, or jealousy – she investigates. She takes it under question as she ruminates with her own heart. She goes for walks, contemplates as she drinks tea, works out at the gym, and talks to her husband.

And when she's ready, if she finds it necessary, she will come and talk it out.

This last step makes her different from her mother, Iran Movahed, who would just hold it in. I don't know what kept Iran so silent, but she rarely let her secrets spill out. Ramesh has inherited this immense capacity to listen, absorb, and hold space. And she has learned how to communicate her way through difficult conversations.

It definitely helps that Ramesh has a Bachelor's degree in Psychology.

I know many Iranian women who have been raised into this system of holding *kine* without releasing their pain. I think our Persian culture hasn't necessarily taught us how to process difficult emotions in a pedestrian way. Of course we have poets like Hafiz and Rumi to mesmerize us with the crystal words they strung into necklaces to process their pain. But that's too high a bar for us to reach. So we reserve the creativity for the "artists" and the rest of us just hold in our emotions until they unleash themselves from the grips of our awareness.

Our relationship with our own emotions is complexified as we are fed drama-filled dynamics through soap operas on TV. A majority of Iranian women watch both Iranian drama shows and foreign soap operas dubbed into Persian. These shows become rituals that offer a sense of rhythmic release. These shows are not entirely, *bad amoozi*, miseducation. I have witnessed many of these shows offer critical commentary on economic inequality, gender role disparity, the right of a widow to re-marry, and sons taking greater responsibility with household chores.

Within these shows though, there are problematic moments that seem so pedestrian that most Iranian families wouldn't even blink an eye. The husband's shouting that comes as a result of feeling disrespected. The wife's piercing shrill in response to feeling misunderstood. The grandmother's sticky guilt-tripping words in response to feeling forgotten. The child's incessant nagging in response to feeling defeated.

Depending on the genre, these shows can offer opportunities for families to sit together and dissect their culture by proxy of the stories being painted. Beware though – each series can create an insatiable thirst that lingers throughout the lifespan of at least 500 episodes.

My mother-in-law, Ramesh, has only one or two she watches. Mostly, these shows act as a gravitational pull to force her to stay motionless. And even then, she can't stay idle. She needs to be handed a bowl of pistachios to have an excuse to sit down and rest her aching back. Her dedicated knuckles crack open pistachios as she temporarily glues herself to the couch.

My mother-in-law, has never had a day “off” in her life. Her father unexpectedly passed away in her late teens leaving her to care for her mother and younger sister since her older brother couldn't be around.

Ramesh's days could be mistaken for the back of a shampoo bottle. Lather. Rinse. Repeat.

She washes the little elf, her nephew, after he's pooped. She mashes up a boiled egg and giggles her way into getting him to eat the whole thing. Most of the time this requires taking



him out into the yard so he can play between bites.

And when Ramesh's mother was bed-ridden in her final stage of life – that was another diaper to change. Another body to wash. Another mouth to feed.

Fortunately, her husband appreciates and values the importance of the role Ramesh plays.

*“To come home to a clean house, organized, tidy, and comfortable – it is critical! The outside world is full of stress, anxiety, tension, and chaos. I come home and within one second I can unwind. Ramesh keeps the energy of our house light. And when there is order in the house, there is order in my mind, and there is order in our life. Without her, this family would have no energy to keep going”*

When she was 22 Ramesh agreed to a suggested marriage. She didn't want to get married at first. When she was done with high school, all she could think about was finding some way to go abroad. She wanted to experience a world bigger than Tehran and Kelardasht – the only two places she had ever known.

Ramesh's grandparents – Davood Movahed and Akaber Teimornejad – played a key role in her life. Since her father passed when she was 18, her grandparents were the elders who offered guidance.

One evening Ramesh was at her grandparent's house. She overheard muttering between her mother and other women.

*“Did you hear that Ghasem Kavooosi wants to come with his eldest son, Kayhan, for kbastegari to ask for Ramesh’s hand in marriage?”*

She had never seen Kayhan, but had heard about him. Everyone said he was respectful, reliable, reverent, and responsible. He came from a good family. And he was a Kavooosi. Kavooosi men have the reputation of being *zan doost*, caring for their wives many needs.

Ramesh’s grandparents were thrilled. Kayhan was the grandson of Akaber’s brother. Their shared familial roots could be trusted. It would help keep the family relations close. And plus, since Ramesh didn’t have a father, it made sense for her to marry sooner than later. A husband could help support both Ramesh and her widowed mother.

A fair attempt was made to postpone the marriage. Ramesh wasn’t quite ready. But her grandparents insisted that Kayhan would be a column she could lean on as she continued growing in life.

Ramesh recalls the initial glance she had of Kayhan that evening at her grandparent’s house.

*“He had gentle eyes. It felt like I could trust him.”*

They were married a few months later. Their engagement party was the first time they spoke to each other.

Ramesh and Kayhan quickly grew into love with one another. Both strongly faithful individuals, the bond between them enhances their trust in life's chaotic order.

Their commitment to the divine manifests as service. Both Ramesh and Kayhan live to support others in any way they know how.

Ramesh has mastered the art of holding space for others. She inherited this quality from her mother, who put herself second from birth till death. Thankfully, Ramesh has learned that there's a time and place to put herself second. And there's a time and place to put herself first.

My mathematician mother-in-law consistently runs complex equations in her mind.

*How many cups of rice should I wash given there is a potential for visitors coming?*

*If I'm taking a trip upstairs to grab the olive oil, is there anything else I can take back up with me?*

*Will Rashin make it home from work in time to get her son so I can go to the gym?*

*When will my son be granted a visa so he can leave this rotting country and start his life with Neda?*

Her commitment to her caretaker role sparks my maternal instinct. She is the embodiment of *az khod gozashtegi* – surpassing the self. When making the choice to have children, she committed whole-heartedly to the process. She has never shied herself from the reality of tradeoffs. She owns the practice as she keeps her balance on the tightrope of conscious choice.

When the onions are nearly ready, sprinkle in turmeric. Allow it to sauté into the mixture for a minute or so. Then, pull out about 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the onion and set it aside for later. Choose to balance the beef : soy ratio based on your circumstances.

For the combination beef – soy stuffing, prepare as follows. First, soak the textured soy protein in cold water for at least 15 minutes. If you're in a rush, you can add a bit of boiling water to it. Strain and rinse it. At this stage, I have learnt to let it “marinate” a bit and absorb more flavor before sautéing the soy. I will take the cleaned soy and pour it into a bowl with a little bit of boiling water, tomato paste, diced garlic, and all the spices I enjoy. I let this sit for about 15 minutes or more until the soy has soaked up the flavor.

Slightly raise the heat under the pan with the onions. Add in some shredded garlic. When that has cooked, I like to add a majority of the spices in first so they sauté a bit on their own. I almost always add more spices toward the end as well. Dump in the soy. If needed, add in a bit more oil. Let the soy sauté for a few minutes until it's beginning to change color. We put the soy in first since it tends to soak up more oil.

Then, it's time for the ground beef. Pour in the amount you'll be using. Flatten it out with a spatula so it gets evenly cooked. Once the beef has gotten an initial exposure to high heat, turn it down, put on a lid, and let it simmer. We want to give the beef and soy time and space for the flavors to mix together.

By intentionally carving out her own time and space, Ramesh has been able to pursue unique opportunities. Once her two sons and her niece were occupied with school in the daytime,

she started going to English language class. Alongside eleven-year-old girls stammering to pronounce “blackboard,” Ramesh radiated as the top student. She stayed committed to the English class, going twice a week, until she advanced into the highest level that center offered.

And after her sons and niece were old enough to mostly take care of themselves, Ramesh enrolled in college. As a forty-two-year-old, she instantly stood out compared to her nineteen-year-old peers. She couldn’t care less. Ramesh was thrilled to be back in school. Four days a week, she would embark on the fatiguing trek to the University. After ensuring there at least one type of food in the fridge the kids + husband could heat up, she would leave the house at the crack of dawn. Ramesh would start the journey with her husband who would give her a ride to the bus station on his way to work on the opposite side of Tehran.

After the first forty-minute bus ride was over, she would walk to the next bus stop. She would take the second twenty-minute bus journey. The last bit could only be done by catching a cab. She would stand on the side of the road to catch a cab willing to drive in the direction of her university. Her two-and-a-half-hour commute was well worth it. By the time she was sitting in the lecture hall, Ramesh was slurping up every sentence the Professor uttered. And in the evenings when she was reversing the same commute, she would flip through her textbooks to ruminate on the various psychology theories mentioned. Her curiosity wouldn’t let her pass out from the inevitable exhaustion of her commute. Ramesh’s insane study habits and torturous commute during her four-year Bachelor degree in Psychology left her with a slipped disk in her neck. But it was totally worth it. Ramesh felt

challenged by the flames of knowledge. Her studies simmered their way into her subconscious as they left her cooked with wisdom.

After at least 15-20 minutes, when the meat appears to be thoroughly cooked, now we can add the tomato and tomato paste. We don't want to add the tomato too early since the acidity prevents the meat from cooking all the way. I like to use at least one small fresh tomato in the mixture. But sometimes, fresh tomato is unjustifiably expensive so I only use paste.

If the tomato paste is very thick, you'll want to loosen it in a cup with some boiling water. I like to add salt into that mixture. Loosen about a cup and a half worth of tomato paste. Pour the half cup into the soy-beef mixture. Pour the remaining tomato sauce onto the sautéed onions that we put aside.

First, bring the stuffing mixture to a gurgling moment with some high heat. Then, reduce the heat all the way, put the lid on, and let it simmer for at least another 15 minutes. When you revisit the mixture, check the flavor. Add any more spices you wish. Pour in a bit of fresh lemon juice or sour grape juice. Close the lid and let it simmer for just a few more minutes.

At this point, preheat the oven. Depending on the size of your oven and what elevation you're living at, choose a setting that you feel is appropriate. When I have an oven that tells me the temperature, I put it at 350 degrees Fahrenheit. When I have an oven where that only has a flame, I eyeball a setting that seems like it can give me a nice slow cook for about an hour.

Now is the time to pick your dish. Ideally, find something that is oven safe and is pretty enough for serving. Once the eggplants are stuffed and baked, it's hard to rearrange without losing their integrity. The dish is especially important if you'll be serving these at a dinner party.

Ramesh goes all out when it comes to hosting dinner parties. I wasn't exaggerating when I said the first time I tasted these eggplants, they were one of four other main dishes. And that is just main dishes. That doesn't include the two varieties of yogurt, two types of salad, five types of pickled vegetables, and two types of rice on the spread. Ramesh doesn't play around.

She has mastered the art of homemaking. Dinner parties become an excuse to clean the entire house and prepare more luscious dishes. Ramesh admits to intentionally cooking way too much food so that the family can lounge in post-party leftovers

These gatherings also become an excuse to use all the fancy dishes. Ramesh has two vitrines full of porcelain serving ware and gorgeously fragile crystal drinking ware. And that's just what's on display. Within hidden nooks and crannies of sliding shelves and tables that flip open, a plethora of decorative dish ware can be found.

These dishes are a testament to the time of her life when buying fancy dishes was a desirable past time. Ramesh would join forces with her aunt and sister-in-law to visit the dish shop at the end of their street. The shopkeeper knew them so he would let them buy on credit. Each

time they went to give the payment from last month's dish, they would get seduced into buying a new one. Serving dishes have become a symbol of an Iranian woman's womanness.

Fancy dish ware are commonly given as gifts to newlyweds and new homeowners. In the United States, it's become custom to create a registry of everything you want and need. In Iran, people commonly gift what looks "good enough" and is still within their budget.

Dishware used to be very affordable to give as gifts. And now since the sanctions have been shaking up the entire Iranian economy, even serving dishes are seeing price spikes.

Once you have found an oven safe and aesthetically suitable dish, it's time to stuff the stomachs of these eggplants! Arrange the fried eggplants into the dish. Using your fingers, slightly spread open the slits in their stomachs. Begin to spoonful the stuffing mixture into the eggplants. Try to get as deep into the slit as possible first, and then pile up on top.

Once all stomachs are stuffed, grab the onion-tomato sauce mixture you had set aside. If you have some type of broth, pour in two cups of that into the mixture. If not, boiling water will be fine. Add some salt and pepper to this sauce. Then pour on top of the eggplants. First, make sure to pour in between the eggplants to give them a nice bath to continue cooking in as they go into the oven. Then, with whatever mixture is remaining, pour on top.

Before it goes in the oven, it should have a nice amount of this liquidy mixture. This allows the eggplants to finish cooking, soften as they absorb the flavors of the stuffing, and thicken into a delectable formation.



If you have access, foil will help this process. If you don't, just be sure to check on the dish periodically so it doesn't dry out. Pop it in the oven at a temperature that will allow it to bake slowly for about an hour. If it's harder to determine your oven's temperature, you can always start with a higher temperature, then turn the oven off and let the dish slow cook within the remaining heat.

If you are serving this dish for a dinner party, now is the perfect time to clean up the house. The food is safe and sound in the oven. Given that we've just cooked, the kitchen is probably the best place to start cleaning.

Ramesh has an advantage when cooking for dinner parties since she has access to three kitchens. Her mother's on the first floor, her own on the second floor, and her sister's on the third floor. She normally does all her cooking on the first and/or third floor and then hosts the party on the second floor. But there is still much preparation to do in her own home.

She ferociously vacuums their 700 square meter home as she mentally plans which serving dishes to use for the dinner party that evening.

No black hole can persist in her home. She vacuums any vacuum. She absorbs responsibilities far beyond what is expected of her. Once, I even had to scold her after she sneakily did my laundry. I reminded her how I've been washing my own clothes since I was six.

Nurture oozes from her nature. Devoted like the Earth, she's served since birth.

No veil can shield my eyes from the reality of household responsibility. My mother-in-law paces herself as I struggle to keep up with this indoor marathon.

When the house is ready, it's time to get ready ourselves. Ramesh rushes to shower to get out the lingering smell of fried onion and meat from her hair. She shakes around the blow-dryer without any rhyme or reason. The mission to dry her hair as quickly as possible is accomplished. She takes off her glasses and squints her way into seeing the eye-makeup that she's putting on. Having had little time or interest in makeup, Ramesh considers herself a novice. She rushes to see if I'm ready yet.

*"Can you do something with my hair?"*

She has relied on my braiding skills to craft hairdos that both look nice and keep the hair out of her face. It's going to be a long night. After serving the dinner and washing the dishes, Ramesh's body is eager for the inevitable dance party that awaits us. Her hair must be able to last the whole night. And look good enough for the spontaneous photo shoots.

By the time the guests arrive, a fruit platter has been set on display. Tea is brewed and ready. The guests will almost always without fail bring sweets with them. The tea is served in accompaniment.

When it's time for dinner, the dining room table is not big enough to host all the food. Some

of the food is left up on the counter top and becomes “self-service.” Everyone takes their place around the table, tummies giggling with awe and anticipation.

Like her mother, Ramesh has come to love hosting. Her and her husband fill the place of her mother and father in being the ones who keep the family together. The ones who stay neutral during tensions between family members. The ones who hold space in their heart for the community. The ones who open their home as a place for wholesome celebration. The ones who remind us of life’s lusciousness.

Ramesh and her husband Kayhan find balance as they honor both gravity and levity. They stay rooted and bask in Earth’s luxuries with upward sense of spiritual commitment to the Great Mystery of Life. They honor what is above and what is below.

To get an ideal baking, the eggplant should be cooked with heat from both above and below. If your oven doesn’t do this simultaneously, start with heat from below for an hour. Then, conclude with about 20 minutes or so with heat from above. At some point in the process, depending on how much or how little liquid is left, take off the foil covering. The goal for the liquid is the middle point between stewy softness and total dryness – we want to maintain a sticky, thick sauce.

But everyone likes it their own way. Some prefer this dish very watery and soupy. And some want it to be firm without any saucy residue. I’m a fan of the middle point. So is my mother-in-law, Ramesh.

Her kind-heartedness has kept her so accommodating of others' needs. She tailors her cooking to the intended audience. She gives her heart, holding space for their preferences and needs.

Ramesh finds strategies to accommodate diverse digestive needs without driving herself mad.

The trickiest person to please, however, is her mother in law – Shekoofeh Teimornejad.

Nani Shekoofeh is quite the hawk when watching her daughter-in-law cook.

*“That’s too much oil, Ramesh”*

Shekoofeh used to offer play-by-play commentary of Ramesh’s every move. But after years of settling into her place, Ramesh finally mustered up the courage to respond.

*“Well, if you don’t like the way I cook, why don’t you make dinner for us instead?”*

Shekoofeh herself prefers Ramesh’s cooking. It’s so much more delectable than what she makes. Since Shekoofeh tries to avoid salt, fats, dark meat, and spicy foods, there’s not much her taste buds can bask in.

Without fail, every time Ramesh prepares food for a group that her mother-in-law will be part of, she puts a small pot to the side before she adds the salt, fats, dark meat, or spices.

Ramesh gives her heart, understanding the peculiarities of just about anyone's circumstantial needs.

### **Shekoofeh | Expressiveness | Steamed White Basmati Rice**

Ingredients:

*long-grain Basmati rice*

*water*

*oil*

*salt & turmeric to taste*

*saffron (if desired)*

Preparation:

Given that steamed rice is served with nearly every Persian stew, it may come as a surprise that it has taken until Chapter 7 to make an appearance. Rice is central to Persian cuisine and takes a central role at every table spread.

*“Without rice, it's not a meal”*

My father's gut holds traditional values. It's no surprise since he comes from the North of Iran which is known for its rice paddies.

Be careful when dining at a Northerners house. You'll end up with a plate covered with a giant mound of rice. You'll be expected to devour that first heaping plate of rice with stew.

The minute your plate begins to expose its emptiness, the host will reach for the spatula.

When guests are present, rice and stew is served into platters and bowls. Arranging the spread is an art form which requires attention to detail and foresight. The spread must be laid out in a way for one of every dish to be within everyone's arms reach.

When it is just the family, rice and stew is left in their pots. The pots are brought to the spread and the food is served directly onto the plates. This saves a lot more dishes and is far more practical for day-to-day living. The pots are usually placed next to one woman who is responsible for serving everyone's plates. One by one, the plates are handed down and the food is served. Depending on who is the one serving, you may need to keep a watchful eye on your plate.

*"Base, that's enough. Thank you!"*

Most often than not, the as those words are being uttered, at least another helping of rice is poured onto the plate.

Usually, the woman doing the serving is either the one who cooked the food or the eldest of the family. In our little three-person household, it was almost entirely my responsibility to both cook and serve the food.

As I balance the glass plate with my left hand, I peer into my grandmother-in-law's eyes to gauge when I have poured enough. Sometimes she says it's enough but I know it's because she's worried there isn't enough food.

I reassure her countless times – there is more than enough.

My grandmother-in-law, Shekoofeh Teimornejad, is used to serving herself last as a means to ensure that all others have enough food on their plate. As a mother of eight children, Shekoofeh has learned the art of rationing. For over a decade, her family lived in one house with her husband's brother's family. They had five kids. Daily meals fed 17 people. And that doesn't include the occasional worker, shepherd, or relative who would join unannounced.

This meant that Shekoofeh and her sister-in-law, Golabroo, were on constant alert for whether the amount of food was sufficient. Even if there was not much stew, the starchy rice could help fill the bellies of their growing children.

My grandmother-in-law has taught me to always wash an extra cup or two of rice.

*“You never know who will come knocking at the door.”*

The first stage of preparing the rice is to decide how many cups you want. If you are using a small cup, it's normally safe to estimate one cup per person. And that's a generous portion. If using a larger cup, it normally amounts to about two cups per person. It takes a while to get the knack of it. The good thing is day-old rice can easily be re-steamed. So if there is enough rice, we normally make more just to be on the safe side.

Once you have determined an appropriate amount of rice, put it into a large bowl. If you are working with rice that may have rocks or questionable bits in it, now is the time to clean it. Spread it around with your fingers searching for anything suspicious. If it is really “unclean,” you may want to spread it into a tray and clean it thoroughly. But washing it will help.

If you know where the rice you’re using was grown and aren’t worried about water quality standards where it was farmed, you can skip this step. If using rice coming from a part of the world you have little to no knowledge about, you may want to add this extra precautionary step before rinsing it normally.

Boil a lot of water. Pour it on-top of the dry rice. Let it sit in the bowl for at least 15 minutes. The heat will allow some contaminants to be stripped out from the rice.

After it has sit, dump out the water. Tilt the bowl at an angle to prevent losing any rice. Each grain is precious and takes much effort to grow and harvest.

Now, it is time for the regular washing. All rice should be washed in this way. Fill up the bowl again. Let it sit for a bit longer. Stick your hand into the bowl and begin shaking the pile of rice side to side. The water will be cloudy from the residue lining the rice. Dump out the water again. Re-fill the bowl. Let it sit. Shake the rice again. Dump out. Repeat this process until the water coming out from the rice is nearly clear. Grab a large enough pot that will leave room for your rice to at least double in size. Fill it with drinking water. Put the lid on and turn it on high heat. At this stage, some will nearly empty all the water, and sprinkle salt on top of the uncooked rice.



When living with my grandmother-in-law, I never put salt in rice. She has borderline high blood pressure so I am obedient about following her dietary needs. But the ironic thing is on the few occasions that she prepared rice, she actually put salt in it!

This is the woman who, after tasting a spoonful of a delicious stew, lays down her spoon with guilt.

*“There’s salt in this right? I shouldn’t eat it”*

My husband and I have had quite the adventure living with his 83-year-old grandmother. For nearly six months, we stayed with her in their home in Kaleno, a small village in the Central Northern mountainous region of Kelardasht.

Shekoofeh was born and raised in Kaleno. As she hobbles her way down the street to the corner store, locals of all ages will stop to say hello.

She is the daughter of Molkara Teimornejad and wife of Ghasem Kavooosi – two important men in Kaleno.

Molkara Teimornejad was a compassionate tailor who lived his life with great respect for his elders. He was known for sewing suits for low income villagers without charging one rial.

Ghasem Kavooosi, Shekoofeh’s husband, came from a long lineage of sheep and cattle

herders. Over time, swaths of land have been accrued for grazing. Ghasem kept the family tradition alive while continuing to care for cattle and sheep and supporting his brother who became a full time shepherd. But Ghasem wanted to support Kaleno in a different way. After getting his high school diploma, he began involvement in provincial politics.

He heard the government was planning to open up a state-sponsored, rationing station in their region. Day after day, he met with skeptical government officials to convince them that Kaleno was the perfect place to host the rationing station. Ghasem's precise accounting and charming neutrality offered him success. The station was opened up in Kaleno bringing greater attention to the material needs of the local people. For Kaleno residents, it became much easier to pick up their monthly rations of staples like rice, oil, salt, and gasoline. Over time, roads were paved, electricity was strung, and indoor piping was established.

Kaleno has changed so much since Nani Shekoofeh was a kid. Two story buildings now adorn the main street – store on the first floor, apartment on the second. There is a girl's school in the village. Families sprawled out across nations communicate via video calls. The television always has a variety of entertaining programming.

And at the same time, Kaleno has not entirely changed. Sheep and goats still have the right of way. Shopkeepers still sell on credit to locals, accepting payments from four months ago. Relatives stop by entirely unannounced, sometimes opening the door without knocking. Neighbors call out across stretches of land by adding a drawn out “oooo” to catch attention.

*“Abay Neda-ooooooooooooooooooooo”*

I turn behind me to see my husband's aunt, Niloofar, standing by the wall which separates her in-law's land from her mother, Nani Shekoofeh's land. I finish pinning my dress up on the clothing line to and make my way to the wall so she doesn't have to yell.

*"Has Nani Shekoofeh started her shower? She called to give a heads-up so I can come scrub her back."*

For Nani Shekoofeh, showering is a day-long event. She showers about once a week. The days leading up to her shower day, Shekoofeh can be heard muttering to herself how her head is beginning to itch and her skin is beginning to crawl. Shower day is determined by the amount of sunlight. One should always shower when it is sunny.

The morning of shower day, Shekoofeh sits on the carpet-lined floor of her bedroom and begins to brush her hair. She has much anxiety about the silver threads she finds stuck to her clothes and scattered around the home.

*"All my hair is falling out. I used to have two thick braids the size of my fist. Now look at this ---"*

She peels back her headscarf to reveal a skimpy little braid at the tail of her head.

*"I'm surprised Niloofar could even turn it into a braid. There's barely anything left!"*

Nani Shekoofeh gets loads of support from her youngest daughter, Niloofar. Her other daughters live primarily in other cities, but come visit often. But Niloofar has spent the last

few years living with her in-laws who own the land right next door. So she visits her mother on a daily basis.

And the best part of Niloofar's proximity? A private back scrubber.

Since she showers once a week, Shekoofeh needs to scrub away the collected dead skin till she feels squeaky clean. When its shower time, she fills her hamper with clean clothes and totters her way over to the shower. She fills up a large basin with hot water. Sits on the stool. And begins her weekly ritual. Usually around halfway in, Niloofar comes to scrub her back. On the rare occasion that Niloofar comes a few minutes later than expected, Shekoofeh's cries are heard.

*"I froze waiting for you! Where have you been!"*

Niloofar smiles as she shrugs aside her mother's expressiveness. She has learnt that when her mother is comfortable, just about anything can come out of her mouth. But she can resonate, because she knows just how cold the shower can get in the winter time.

She leaves her mother to finish washing her hair. Niloofar puts a pot of boiling water on the stove and asks if I can make tea for when Nani Shekoofeh comes out of the shower. She'd love to stay and chat but her mother-in-law has likely woken up from her nap and she'll want tea.

Ten minutes later, Nani Shekoofeh comes hobbling out into the hall holding clutching the basket now filled with her dirty clothes.

*“Oh God. I’m freezing. Oh God. Don’t let me catch a cold. Ayyy. Uhhhhhhh.”*

She pleads her way as she plops herself in front of the gas heater. From mid-Autumn until mid-Spring, Nani Shekoofeh lives in front of this heater. The steamy heat gifts her old bones with comfort as she begins adding on more layers.

*“That was five. Now this is six. With seven I’m all set. One headscarf. And a second one is enough.”*

Nani Shekoofeh braggingly counts aloud. She prides herself in how many layers she wears at once. I bring her a glass of tea and her raisins. She blissfully basks in the heat coming from behind her. Like rice, Nani needs the steamy heat to soften.

Once the water is gurgling and boiling, it is time to add the rice. It’s important to note that we are using the *ab-kesb* method for cooking Persian rice where we strain the rice after letting it par-boil loosely with way too much water. This keeps the rice fluffy and the individual grains separate from one another. A far more decorative look. The upsides of this method are that we have more control on how steamed the rice gets and we get really sweet *tahdik*, crisp rice, at the bottom of the pot – more on that later. The main downside is that some of the nutrients from the rice wash out when we strain it. Many brush that aside and say rice’s nutrient levels are insignificant to begin with.

To avoid straining the rice, there is also a *dami* method where you put the perfect amount of water with the rice and let it boil together. How does one determine the “perfect” amount of water, you ask? Well, these *shirzani* experts whip out their index finger. On the inside of the palm, the second line from the bottom of the index finger becomes our ruler. Starting from the top of the rice, you pour water until it reaches the line on your finger. The genius of folk wisdom continues to mesmerize me.

For the *ab-kesb* method, described here, carefully scoop the clean rice into the pot. You want there to be a lot of water, but not too much so it doesn’t spill over. Leave the pot open. The rice will start off at the bottom. Once it is boiling, it will begin to swirl around in waves around the pot.

If you sense you have too much water, use a ladle to scoop it out. At this stage, depending on your rice, a lot of foam may begin to gather at the top. Each strain of rice has different qualities and characteristics. If a lot of foam is gathering, you can use a ladle to scoop and dump it out.

Nani Shekoofeh’s tactic is to blow on the foam. She grips onto the handle of the oven to keep her balance as she proudly babysits her pot of rice.

In the six months I was living with her, I did a majority of the cooking. There were a handful of occasions where Nani Shekoofeh made rice. Once, both my husband and I caught a gnarly cold and quarantined ourselves to keep Nani protected. Another time, I stayed late at

the carpet weaving studio to tie up the last rows to be able to bring the carpet with me back to the U.S.

*"I've already made the rice!"*

Nani proudly exclaims the minute I open the door.

I've been told my presence inadvertently made her a bit lazy. Nani Shekoofeh has been living on her own since her husband passed away 17 years ago. She does her housework, chores, cleaning, and cooking at a pace and caliber that serves her creaking bones.

When she's on her own, her go-to meal is plain white rice topped with either yogurt or warm milk if she's in the mood for something runnier. Easy and filling.

But when I started living with her, bit by bit, I inherited all homemaker responsibilities.

Thankfully, Nani would offer to help, especially with time-intensive tasks that require patience. Nani excels at tasks like peeling sticky, small cloved local garlic; de-shelling walnuts, cleaning and de-stemming herbs, or preparing plums picked from her own fruit trees to cooked down into a sour paste.

Living with Nani Shekoofeh for six months has taught me much about what can happen when we age.

When we age, it appears we can finally respond to wind that whispers the wisdom of slowing down. When we can finally give ourselves the right to rest.

Nani's waking hours are woven together seamlessly with closed eye rest. One moment she is spreading her flowery pants to dry upon the fraying yellow rope on her balcony. The next she is taking a nap on the carpet beneath her.

She flips through her grandson's first grade notebook. She reads aloud the simple sentences created by a child first entering the written Persian tongue.

*"Father gave bread. Father gave water."*

We marvel at the stick-like handwriting and Nani grazes her neck toward me with glistening eyes.

*"See how well I kept this?"*

I stand beside her in the kitchen as we take turns reading the sentences aloud.

While her mind is warmed with entertainment, I slip away to continue preparing lunch.



At the beginning, when cooking for my grandmother-in-law, I would get quite nervous. I had witnessed how she would critique her own daughters and her daughters-in-law.

Most of the time, I abide by her suggestions and play-by-play commentary during my cooking process.

*“Wait till the oil gets a bit hotter before putting in the eggplants.”*

*“Steam the spinach first a bit.”*

*“Keep the rice on the flame for longer. The center needs to get nice and steamy.”*

My husband snaps at his grandmother.

*“You’ve been tasting her food for the last three months. You know she can cook, Nani!”*

Nani Shekoofeh tilts her head down. She shows signs of shame but continues to mutter cooking advice within her internal dialogue.

I grab the tomatoes resting on the table and begin to cut them using the “grandma” method. Only a knife and my hands are needed. I carefully pull the knife in and out of the fleshy fruit, using my thumb to guide me.

Out of the corner of my eye I see Nani wielding the fly swatter. She grips the bendy weapon.

With complete stillness, she watches the fly land on her grandson's antique notebook.

With confidence, she slaps the weapon down and is delighted by the speed in which she was able to react to her enemy's arrival.

The swatter is carefully lifted with anticipation of a juicy carcass smeared across her grandson's handwriting.

*"Abooom? Bi sabab!"*

She curses at the little bugger that got away. Her confidence plummets.

Nani Shekoofeh's head lifts up with the calmness of a sloth and the gaze of a tai chi master. She scans the kitchen for traces of her prey. Suddenly, a sink of self-consciousness sparks her as she turns to see if her defeat captured the attention of an audience.

Nani hobbles around on this Earth, sighing out in prayer.

*"Ey khoda – oh God"*

*"Ya Ali – hail Ali"*

*"Khoda shokor – thank God"*

Nani's faith is a stew brewed from well-worn experiences, widowed nights, and creaky bones. Her time with this Earth grants her much wisdom that is worth respecting.

When it comes time to determine if the rice is par-boiled enough to strain it, Nani Shekoofeh's wisdom comes in handy. Once the rice has been swirling around in the boiling water for at least five minutes, it should be checked. Use a spatula to scoop out some rice. Nani has a few go-to methods. The first is to take a grain and smoosh it with your finger nail. If it is soft on the outside but has a little hardness at the core, it is likely ready. Next, you can do this same process with your teeth. It may be easier to gauge under your bite. We're looking to have the rice about 80% cooked. The last method involves the shape of the rice. If some of the grains are beginning to curl up and fold at the center, it is ready to be strained.

*"Yes, it's ready. Do you see it? It's beginning to bend at the waist. Quick quick, the strainer."*

I giggle as I compare her own posture to the rice. Curled up at the waist. Tilted over.

To strain the rice, it is best to have a clean sink. A metal strainer is ideal. I avoid using plastic strainers since the rice is boiling hot. Put the strainer in the sink. Grab the pot carefully and begin to pour the watery rice into the strainer, tilting the pot away from you. Steam burns are the worst. Once all the rice has been strained, you can run a little cold water over it to stop the cooking. Grab the strainer from both sides and toss it up and down a few times to fluff the rice.

Go back to the pot you just used. If there is still a bit of water in the pot, let it sit on the flame for a bit to evaporate out. Starting off with a medium high flame, pour in some oil. This is what we do to create the *tabdik*, crispy rice layer I mentioned earlier. The more oil, the crispier it gets. There are also plenty of varieties for *tabdik* where you can lay down thinly sliced potatoes, thin bread, a bit of rice mixed with yogurt, or even sliced onions first. We take our *tabdik* quite seriously.

I will cover how to prepare most simple, but just as delicious, variety here. A thin layer of oil should be spread to coat the bottom of the pot. To spread it evenly, grab the pot by its handles and turn it around to allow the oil to cover the whole surface. Once the oil is hot, sprinkle a bit of turmeric into it for a nice color. Spread that out with a spatula. Then, begin to scoop in the par-boiled rice from the strainer into the pot. First, make sure you create a nice layer at the bottom. Then begin to toss in the rice into a mound. Careful not to squish the rice with the spatula. Fluffy rice is an aesthetic bonus in most Persian cuisine. Once all the rice has been put into the pot, gently pull it up into a mountain using the spatula. This allows space for the steam to spiral around and between the rice and finish cooking slowly. At this point, turn down the heat a bit, but not all the way yet. Stick on the lid for a moment or two to let the steam begin to form.

When you see the steam forming, turn down the heat all the way. Then, using either a paper towel or a clean cotton cloth, create a little “steam bonnet” to absorb the excess steam from the rice. If using a cloth, spread it out on the counter, place the lid in the center, fold opposite angles of one side first, then tie the other side into a knot. If using paper towel, rest it on top of the pot and then place the lid on top. Use a bit of water to stick down the

flapping edges of the paper towel onto the lid. With the rice on low heat, we let it steam slowly for at least 45 minutes. But this depends on the amount of rice. The more rice, the longer it needs to cook thoroughly.

Nothing beats the steamy aroma of cooking rice. It swirls around from the stove straight into one's nostrils.

Nani Shekoofeh awakens from her mid-morning nap to the smell of the rice cooking.

*“Ayy ghorbaaaanet. Bless you for cooking for us.”*

Nani has begun speaking to me in Khajevani, a local dialect spoken by the Kurds who have migrated to the North. Many years ago our Kurdish ancestors migrated from the Western part of Iran, closer to the border with Iraq. Since then, the Kurds who moved up North to Kelardasht have begun mixing with the other local tribes of Gilaks, Lors, and Turks. The Khajevani language has become a creole-type dialect that has lost some of its original Kurdish roots and gained much vocabulary from neighboring languages.

My father's family and husband's family speak Khajevani as their primary language. My husband and his brother even text in this dialect, entering new territory as an ancient spoken language is cemented into written characters for the first time.

I began to learn Khajevani during stretches of time in Iran with my husband's family. I'm at the point where I can understand just about everything. But when it comes to speaking, I

stammer in spirals like a two-year-old just learning to talk. Slowly and surely.

So it feels like an honor when Nani Shekoofeh speaks to me in Khajevani.

Simply through her being, I have learned much from Nani Shekoofeh. It helps that she's so expressive. She can turn just about anything into a teaching moment.

Nani lives in an animated world. She is in constant conversation with herself, the world around her, and the spirit of God above.

She scans dried lentils for any lingering rocks or sticks.

*"Oh good for you. So plump! Well done!"*

She prepares to pour in laundry detergent into the machine.

*"Cleans out stains. Safe for all colors. Excellent. You are just what we need. Thank you!"*

At times, her expressiveness can also manifest as mind-numbing whimpering.

*"Oh Gooood. Oh God why. Oh I can't. Ayy my knees. Ayyyy my back. My shoulders ooph. My neck  
aaah.*

*Oh I'm sick. Oh my blood pressure. Oh my heart. They said I need an angio. Why has no one taken me?"*

Her expressiveness gets her what she wants. It may not always be what she needs.

Nani Shekoofeh keeps herself entertained as she mutters around the house

*“Oh, rice. Are you ready? I hear you calling my name!”*

Staying bent at the waist, Nani grips the ledge of the counter to help keep her balance as she slides to the stovetop. She brings out her index finger to use yet another grandma trick. This time, it’s to test if the rice has steamed properly. She wets her finger with her tongue and strokes the side of the pot, producing a “tssssssss” sound.

*“Ay yes, you are ready! Well done.”*

When the rice has steamed for an appropriate amount of time, turn off the heat underneath it. The good thing about rice is that it can be prepared in advance and re-heated before serving.

When getting fancy, Iranians mix brewed saffron with some of the rice to adorn the top of the platter. Consult the method for brewing saffron described at the end of chapter five if you wish to do so. Mix the brewed saffron in a bowl with some white rice, and decorate as desired.

Nani Shekoofeh hides her saffron better than she hides her cash. After months of living with her and working in the kitchen, I finally found where it was tucked away.

Wrapped in four layers of plastic bag, the ruby saffron finally unleashed itself. Like many women from her generation, Nani believes that luxuries like saffron should only be used when guests are present.

We want to both show off our abundance and prove to our guests that we value them and are willing to give them the best of the best.

As I begin to give shape to the family I'm starting, I hold onto traces of this thought process. I cherish this sentiment to show our guests just how dear they are to us. And I also cherish my own family and our day-to-day lives which deserve to be sprinkled with the occasional luxury.

**Conclusion** | The making of an ancestor

Ingredients:

*time*

*gratitude*

*trust in the unknown*

*reverence for this precious Earth*

*willingness to receive wisdom from experience*

*capacity to hold space for the past, present, and future*

As I write this conclusion in February 2020, I know this is not the end. This “Making of a *Shirzan*” project has just only begun.



The method of narrative ethnography leaves me pulsating with excitement. I have found a structure that enables me to make meaning and draw wisdom from family stories, recipes, and photos. Through this practice, I help preserve and pass on folk knowledge.

My personal practice of sustainability is one of delicate awareness that I am the future generation of my ancestors and I am simultaneously becoming an ancestor for future generations. With increased awareness of what I am inheriting from the past, I can take full responsibility for the choices I make in the present, which help carve the future.

The seven *shirzan* I have profiled so far act as symbols for important lessons I can learn as I prepare to have my own family.

*fierceness – independence – unconditional love – guarding the future – patience – holding space – expressiveness*

I carry their stories in my tool belt and draw from their wisdom in times of need.

Along with their wisdom, these *shirzan* remind me that no one is perfect. We all have a shadow.

Each of these qualities reveals a shadow.

*fierceness* can make one too tough to be able show softness.

*independence* can leave one having a hard time asking for help.

*unconditional love* can enable others to easily take advantage of you.

*guarding the future* with blindness can create a miserable present.

*patience* can cause unhealthy situations to linger on far longer than is needed.

*holding space* only for others can lead one to ignore their own needs.

*expressiveness* in its extreme can diminish the value of what one wants to share.

I will continue to collect these stories, recipes and lessons from my lineage to help weave together an intelligent membrane. This membrane can help me filter and choose what beliefs, practices, patterns, and rituals I wish to hold onto, which I am ready to let go of, and which I am ready to transform to serve the unique needs of my time and place.

As I continue this conscious practice of becoming an ancestor, I cherish the ingredients of ...

*time* which allows just about anything to settle and offers heightened clarity.

*gratitude* which grants a re-awakening of what is abundant in my life.

*trust in the unknown* which places me in a mutually beneficial relationship with life.

*reverence for this precious Earth* which moves me to use resources with awe-filled care.

*willingness to receive wisdom from experience* which heightens how deeply I learn life lessons.

*capacity to hold space for the past, present, and future* which grant me continuity in how I receive life.

The conclusion ties the knot on one point in time. By no means is my work done.

And thank goodness for that. My curiosity is too energized to stop now...

CHAPTER TWO | Co-authored Journal Article | *Creative tools and design principles for sustainable classrooms*

## OVERVIEW

Chapter two is a co-authored journal article that covers creative learning tools and design principles for sustainable classrooms. “Sustainable classrooms” are described as spaces that are alive, adaptive, and open to innovation. Three years of facilitation experience for a 300-level class on “International Development and Sustainability” at Arizona State University are combined with data from student journals and interviews. Design principles of humanity, horizontality, and compassionate facilitation are found to be critical in supporting sustainable learning opportunities.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Q1: How do undergraduate students experience creative tools used in a formal education context?

Q2: What is the role of creative tools in creating a “sense of community” in the classroom?

Q3: What types of creative tools break down power dynamics and create appreciation for diversity?

Q4: When students are given space for subjective expression, is the learning environment changed?

## INTENDED AUDIENCE

This co-authored article was submitted to [The Journal of Sustainability Education](#) for initial review. The Journal of Sustainability Education is an open-access journal which “serves as a

forum for academics and practitioners to share, critique, and promote research, practices, and initiatives that foster the integration of economic, ecological, and social-cultural dimensions of sustainability within formal and non-formal educational contexts.”<sup>39</sup>

The only barriers to reading the article are unfiltered internet access and literacy in the English language. There are no fees or subscriptions needed to view the article. The intended audience for this piece are sustainability academics and practitioners who are interested in experimenting with creative learning methods. Moderate academic writing is used and complemented with highly legible first-person narratives and quotes from students.

## METHODS USED

To select interview participants, purposive sampling was utilized.<sup>40</sup> Former students from three semesters were contacted to gain insight about how they experienced creative learning tools used. Interviews were conducted when I was no longer their “instructor” and responsible for assigning grades. Students self-selected involvement and no incentive was offered. Semi-structured oral interviews were conducted to allow for emergent conversation within a framework of guided questions.<sup>41</sup> Since participants self-selected involvement, perspectives are likely favorable to the creative teaching methods used. This potential bias is recognized and overcome with data from reflective portfolios completed by 85 students across the span of three semesters.

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<sup>39</sup> <http://www.susted.com/wordpress/aboutus/>

<sup>40</sup> Bernard, H. R. (2011). *Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*, 5<sup>th</sup> edition. Rowman Altamira.

<sup>41</sup> Bernard (2011)

Since this research is informed by an arts-based research methodology, creative tools were integrated into traditional interviews to enhance data with the complexity of subjective experience. To open the interview, a visioning activity was used to guide participants through self-conjured frames of images from experiences in the class. To close the interview, students were asked to tell a children’s story beginning with “once upon a time” to summarize how class experiences shaped their perception of sustainability. Interviews have been transcribed and coded using qualitative content and thematic analysis.<sup>42</sup>

### **Creative tools and design principles for sustainable classrooms**

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#### Abstract:

Standardized, assembly-line models of education have created significant momentum for unsustainable classroom situations. Classes are sustained throughout the term using ranking systems and proof of outcomes such as grading and reporting on content knowledge acquired. There is a clear ending in sight. Both students and instructors are often bound to this ending, often feeling a deep sense of relief at the end of each class session. As sustainability educators, we have become conscious that industrialized methods of education no longer serve societies re-envisioning ways of sustaining themselves. Sustainability Education necessitates sustainable classrooms – spaces that are alive, adaptive, and open to innovation. We explore design principles that can support sustainable classrooms, focusing

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<sup>42</sup> Hennink, M. M. (2014). Designing and conducting focus group research. In *Focus Group Discussions- Understanding Qualitative Research*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

on creativity, humanity, horizontality, and compassionate facilitation. We share examples of creative learning tools used in a 300-level Sustainability classroom in Arizona State University. Data collected through student interviews and journaling are woven throughout the article to ground our viewpoints with practical insight.

Keywords: sustainability education; creativity; experiential learning; sustainable classrooms; Arizona

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Introduction

In the United States, “traditional” higher education classrooms often look identical. Bound within four walls, desks and chairs face forward where the professor is expected to give lectures and offer visual supplements. This transmissive model of teaching has roots in

Taylorism and Fordism, training students with models of efficiency and top-down management to prepare for factory-working futures (Pitsoe & Letseka, 2013). Assembly-line efficiency has brought us rapid material technological advancements. Nonetheless, it should not be forgotten that this mechanized mentality was set up to promote compliance and hinder creative impulses. Path dependency has led many classrooms to inherit top-down education models that promote standardization and mindless repetition. Literature on sustainability higher education has recognized drawbacks of this method and offered criticism (e.g. Ferreira, 2017), but we are still learning how to implement alternative models that can operate within the constraints of current higher education institutions.

The industrial paradigm is no longer paramount in our digitalized society. Creativity is widely recognized as key for both employability and developing purposeful lives in a rapidly changing world (McIntyre et al., 2018). The socio-ecological challenges we face today require us to embrace the complexity and uncertainty inherent in our interconnected world and respond creatively (Sandri, 2013). The enormity of our global sustainability predicament is a challenge and opportunity for educational institutions. Can schools and universities update teaching models to help students engage with cumbersome and unpleasant realities without falling in despair, frustration, or paralysis?

We support our experiences applying creative pedagogical methods and tools upon literature that calls for pedagogical updates towards: creativity and innovation (Sandri, 2013); resilient learning (Sterling, 2010); love and emotional intelligence (Gorman, 2015); critical consciousness (Ferreira, 2017); and contemplative practices (Papenfuss et al., 2019). We



build on their insights, describe some learning tools we have created and tested, and present students' feedback to assess their effects.

Extending Sterling's (2010) theoretical vision for "Sustainable Education", we propose "sustainable classrooms" as a conceptual construct to characterize learning environments that are organically co-produced, stay alive, adaptive, and open to innovation. Students and instructors participate as whole human beings and form relationships that contribute to their reciprocal thriving and a sense of community. The key is that participants take ownership of their own learning process beyond the official class times, spaces, and institutional norms. As a result learning becomes a truly emergent phenomenon.

We expand Sandri's (2013) work to offer practical examples of creative tools used in a formal education setting. Creative learning tools are experiential activities that are intentionally designed to offer necessary content knowledge while supporting the individual needs of subjective learning processes. These tools draw from the strengths of various forms of embodiment and communication, such as interpersonal, visual, and movement-based expressions. Our experiences facilitating a 300-level Sustainability classroom at Arizona State University (ASU) have confirmed that creativity is key to sustaining learning within classrooms. We have witnessed how creative learning tools allow classrooms to become "spaces of possibility" for safe self-experimentation and innovation at the subjective level (Kagan et al., 2018). Our observations suggest that both inter- and intra-personal experimentation are key to support sustainable classrooms.

## Article Outline and Use of Student Testimonials

The next section discusses our context and positionality within Sustainability Education. We then review literature calling for transformations within Sustainability Education. We share our perspective on sustainability, define sustainable classrooms, and discuss the use of specific creative learning tools. We offer three design principles that have been found to support sustainable classrooms: humanity, horizontality, and compassionate facilitation. We end by discussing the limitations of this article and sharing how sustainable classrooms adapt with the times to provide future leaders with tools needed to work with an ever-changing, complex world.

We use quotes from students placed within the text along with an avatar they have created of themselves. Avatar icons seek to contextualize the quotes by offering a schema of the student's self-image. The images express each student's self-perceived identity, which is a key building block to supporting sustainable classrooms. Rather than providing our commentary or interpretation of the quotes, we allow them to stand alone. We recognize that we are sharing our interpretation through the bolding of certain phrases and strategic choice and placement of the quote in and of itself. You will also find first-person narratives from the authors woven into text. This method of writing is inspired by Milstein et al. (2017) to draw from personal experiences to support theoretical contributions.

## Context and Positionality

“Arizona State University’s School of Sustainability is the first comprehensive degree-granting program of its kind in the United States, with a focus on finding real-world solutions to environmental, economic, and social challenges (SOS, n.d.)” The School of Sustainability was established in 2006, and grants Undergraduate and Graduate degrees with a variety of concentrations.

David joined the School of Sustainability in 2012 and began teaching the 300-level course on “International Development & Sustainability” in 2013. His initial pedagogy was a conventional approach to liberal arts education. Critical thinking about international development was encouraged through the presentation of concepts, ideas, and case studies defined from a political ecology perspective. Content presentation and class discussions were supported with conventional teaching materials, including scientific papers, reports, webpages, and videos. As a culminating experience students produced a development project idea.

In Fall 2015, Neda joined David in supporting the course while completing her M.A. in Sustainability. Although Neda was technically David’s Teaching Assistant, he offered an equal power dynamic to work as co-facilitators. We began taking pedagogical risks by integrating theatre, poetry, and contemplative practices. At times, we doubted our qualifications to be facilitating such methods. But support from one another allowed us to feel the confidence to experiment with intention.

We co-facilitated the course for two semesters and created a video about our experiences with transformative education for sustainability. Then, Neda took a year to travel before continuing her studies. During that time, David had two other graduate students co-facilitate with him where they experimented with indigenous knowledge and designing the class around integrated human development. When Neda returned for her Ph.D. in Fall 2017, we were asked to turn the course into an online experience. We wanted to imprint the experiential nature of our in-person course into the online format. In Spring of 2018, we facilitated the in-person course together again. A main step was to start sharing power with students by inviting them to lead classes and conduct self-grading evaluations that were accounted for in their final grade.

While David was on sabbatical from Fall 2018 to Spring 2019, Neda facilitated the course on her own. She introduced movement-based learning tools and cross-cultural practices into the classroom. Affirmations from students over the years led Neda to use this 300-level classroom as a field site for her Doctoral research. Part of Neda's multi-media dissertation includes compiling creative learning tools into this open-access website. She has collected reflective portfolios from 81 students between Spring 2018 - Spring 2019. Feedback sessions using the "Critical Response Process" were held twice each term, both mid-way through the semester and once the course was completed to gain insight from students' perspectives. Additionally, in Spring 2019, Neda conducted 15 interviews with former students from the past three terms who self-selected involvement. The quotes you will see throughout the article come from student interviews, reflective portfolios, and feedback sessions. Permission has been granted to use these statements.

## Pedagogical Updates within Sustainability Education

PAIGE: “***Studying sustainability for me has brought on a lot of stress and borderline depression at some points because it is so sad to hear how everything is changing... I do try, I’m trying to make small gradual changes but... I’m trying to come to terms with the fact that I can only do so much?***”

Sustainability “wicked problems” require us to embrace the complexity and uncertainty inherent in our interconnected world by promoting transdisciplinary research (Lang et al., 2012), working with normative perspectives (Sneddon, Howarth, & Norgaard, 2006) and harnessing performative methods of communication (Castro-Sotomayor et al., 2018).

Yet, sustainability classrooms often perpetuate the path-dependent methods of mechanized education that prevent innovative thinking. There is a built-in tension where universities push for real-world impact, expecting originality and groundbreaking contributions, while teaching rarely exhibits innovation and fails to encourage students’ creativity. Sustainability Education has been criticized for reproducing dominant socio-economic and cultural teaching paradigms (Ferreira, 2017). A majority of sustainability courses, undergraduate and graduate, continue to follow traditional formats of lectures, tests, and reports which arguably perpetuate hierarchy and disregard the full development of students’ own humanity (Freire, 1972). We argue that this mechanized classroom model is becoming unsustainable for Sustainability Education classrooms.

DANEILLE: *When I think about saving the world, it actually makes me want to vomit!... I*

*guess, I like to hone in on smaller things because when I try to think of the big picture it just makes me feel sick, it's a lot to think about. **There's a lot of people in the world, and they all think really differently.** And they live very differently. So **not one solution is ever going to be applicable to everyone in all the spaces that they live.**"*

Unique pedagogical needs have been recognized within the field of Sustainability Education given the complexity of topics studied, but less attention has been paid to the anxieties that arise from working through the messy, interwoven nature of these topics. Transmissive methods of learning that view “knowledge” as something “out there” to be acquired by the teacher and placed within the student are insufficient (Sterling, 2010). Disempowering methods do not trigger creativity (Freire, 1972). And worse, transmission of bare facts can leave students feeling overwhelmed with despair. By bringing in their own lived experiences, their subjectivity, students can connect to the material in a more meaningful way which may further encourage them to take action outside the classroom (Milstein et al., 2017).

*NEDA: I think back to my Undergraduate days studying Environmental Science and Policy at the University of Maryland.*

*I remember the large lecture halls at 9am with endless rows of seats sparsely filled.*

*Dedicated and groggy-eyed, some of us tried to take note of every word the professor uttered. We were fueled by the combination of curiosity, caffeine, and concern for what we would be tested on.*

*Some students perused social media sites relying perhaps on the power of passive absorption. And some could barely keep their heads from slipping into the cracks of their seats.*

*Slide after slide, we were shown data verifying that the climate is changing, sea levels are rising, economies are more unequal, and politicians more corrupt. Slide after slide, we were being told that the world as we knew it, was ending. Some professors tried to end on an uplifting note. We were shown examples of small steps we could take to help reduce our footprint. But I knew that no matter how many lightbulbs I changed, I could never stop the climate from changing.*

*Class after class, I would armor up. I wielded my lunch box and water bottle as weapons against disposable consumerism. On the outside, I appeared as an environmental warrior willing to change every unsustainable habit. On the inside, I was withering with worried wonder if my species would be wise enough to persist.*

The level of complexity and uncertainty inherent within sustainability topics necessitates unique learning tools to support emotional resilience. Special skills needed for sustainability practitioners have been synthesized into the following competencies: systems-thinking, anticipatory, normative, strategic, and interpersonal (Wiek, Withycombe, & Redman, 2011). These competencies have been widely received, but there is little consideration for “inner competencies” and each student’s creativity (Sandri, 2013). Sustainability classrooms should prepare individuals to dig deep within their own experiences to find appropriate responses within a variety of contexts (Sterling, 2010). Milstein et al. (2017) use the term “inside-out classroom” to describe these types of learning spaces where individuals are encouraged to connect their inner life experiences to course topics.

JESS: ***“I’m definitely more fulfilled in the work I do in my community and in the actual world versus learning about it in class. For example, you learn about gentrification in class. But then one experiences it in life. Either you know people who have experienced it or you yourself are experiencing it.***

***Those are two different things. But I do take the things and the skills I learn in class, the system-thinking lens that we really focus on in sustainability and apply that to the work I do.”***

Sustainability educators have turned toward the field of Transformative Learning to update pedagogy with considerations of the student as a whole, multidimensional human being (Mahmud, 2017; Papenfuss et al., 2019; Sipos et al., 2008). Learning is seen as happening both inside and outside of the classroom by finding meaning in our everyday lives (Sindleton, 2015). By connecting course material with personal experience, learners gain new ways of understanding lived experiences and may develop a greater sense of ethical responsibility (Dirkx, 1998; Sterling, 2010). The “transformation” in learning is rooted in efforts toward individual consciousness-raising, critical reflection, and development which in turn supports collective processes (Dirkx, 1998; Milstein et al., 2017). Sustainability educators are recognizing that emotional investment is a necessary step for individuals to view the interconnections between the self and the systems one is a part of (Gorman, 2015; Wapner, 2016).



MEGAN: *“There’s a lot of unexpected learning that happens...It’s okay to have these feelings but to be mindful of them is also being aware of what it is to be human. It’s a high level of emotional intelligence that people struggle with... they see it as a weakness.*

*But I don’t think it should be seen as a weakness... **You have to be uncomfortable to want to change things.** You have to be angry to want to speak up. Every emotion serves some sort of purpose...This class taught me that...**emotional intelligence is something that I’ve realized is okay in a professional situation.**”*

Our experiences with creative learning tools confirm that we can support students with accepting complexity by helping them transform their emotions into empowered action. A key element for integrating creative tools is to frame sustainability in transdisciplinary terms.

### Sustainable Classrooms

Our sustainability perspective extends the basic principles through which life sustains itself to human systems such as: balancing competition & cooperation; co-evolving with environments; occupying liminal spaces between order & chaos; intelligently responding to stimuli in their surroundings; and embracing uncertainty in pursuit of novelty (Capra, 1996).

We view any system as “sustainable” when the relationships between its components are mutually beneficial and contribute to the thriving of each component and the system as a whole. Thus, a “sustainable classroom” is an emergent space which supports the multi-

dimensional learning needs of diverse participants and keeps sustaining its own emergence to continue meeting the evolving participants' needs.

HAILEY: ***"I have never been more challenged in my academic life than in this class.***

*Without legitimate grades attached to each aspect of the class and often a lack of instruction accompanying each learning experience, I have never been so fearful of the outcome of a class.*

*Yet, as the class went on, I learned that learning is about more than grades and that I can't constantly fear things that are mainly out of my control. **How can I grow if I am constantly letting fear and anxiety of not being creative or not stepping outside of my comfort zone rule my life?"***

Informed by a living systems perspective, we characterize a sustainable classroom as one that is alive, adaptive, and open to innovation. Students and instructors participate as whole human beings and form mutually beneficial relationships that contribute to their reciprocal thriving. The diversity of each subject is embraced. Cultural heterogeneity strengthens the resilience of the emerging learning environment (Manuel-Navarrete et al., 2004). A palpable sense of community is formed, offering participants a safe space to experiment and innovate (Sandri, 2013; Kagan et al., 2018). Opportunities are held for each individual's thriving and for the class as a whole. Learning processes are carried forward by individuals themselves outside the classroom setting.

KAILEY: ***"I think that it was really important that you made personal***

***development a part of this course as well...because normally, unless it's super***

*interesting to me, a lot of coursework stays in the classroom for me...*

*I remember one time, it was a Saturday and I was at my aunt's house. I don't remember what I was thinking about but in that moment I felt compelled to write in my journal about what we talked about in class and then how it correlated with what I was thinking about. **That was a really interesting moment for me since that's never happened where I'm actually connecting things in class to what I'm feeling..**"*

In contrast, an unsustainable classroom is stagnant. This model of education is necrophilic, viewing knowledge as external and static (Freire, 1972). Teachers are “all-knowing” and students are seen as empty vessels, with little prior knowledge, waiting to be filled with content. Classes are sustained throughout the term using external outcomes such as grades and proof of content knowledge acquired. There is a clear ending in sight. Both students and instructors are often bound to this ending, often feeling a deep sense of relief at the end of each class session.

DAWSON: *“One of the biggest things that I noticed is **in a lot of classes, you do the work to please your instructor and you want them to be proud of you in a weird way like that.** In this class, yes you ask things of us. But it's not in a way where if we don't perform, we're going to be scolded or graded wrong.*

*I believe **you bring out the best in people to perform at their best so they can feel good about themselves and work they did..**"*

Sustainable classrooms support sustained learning. Both students and teachers engage in horizontal, shared ownership of the classroom space. The reciprocal learning is mutually beneficial. When a sense of community emerges, the learning can be sustained by the group. There is no longer the need for a clear “instructor.” The role of the teacher becomes one of a facilitator, helping guide the process along. All participants carry forward their own learning beyond the official ending of class sessions, perhaps even with a wish that the class could somehow continue. A non-participant may be able to observe the sustainable quality of a classroom from the degree of engagement, depth of conversations, types of relationships formed, and level of effort put into class activities.

GRACE: *“I like how we’ve collectively gone through a journey together. I feel like because we’ve all gone through this class, if I see you on campus I have a different bond with you than I would have with another person that I would have gone through even another Sustainability class with.*

***But also through this collective journey...I feel like I’ve gone through a personal journey too. For example, I’m more open about my gender identity now and I’ve started asking the people around me to use they/them and I don’t think I could have done that without this class.”***

The “sustainable classroom” is not a black or white concept or a formula that can be mechanically applied. There are different types and degrees of classroom’s “sustainability” and their emergence will always be an adaptive and contextual process. Facilitators are key as they need to be constantly observing, rapidly responding, and willing to take radical turns away from initial plans. Given the complexity of context and individuals, one learning tool

used in one space will generate different results than the same tool being used in a different space. However, as with any complex system, certain conditions will tend to support the emergence of sustainability within a classroom environment. Also, there will generally be certain thresholds of these conditions that, when met, can nudge the system toward a stable state of sustainability. In any case, our main point in this paper is that a diverse and evolving toolbox of creative learning methods and tools is key to cultivate learning spaces that are alive, adaptive, and open to innovation.

SUSIE: *[In the class] **creativity allowed you to open doors to yourself and your thought processes in ways that an academic paper or a test might not, and to bring that through authentically and process it...***

*Our class has left me feeling like there is a missing component in our traditional forms of education. Of course, different subject matters require different structures... **but education itself denies a vital component of the human experience which is creation and expression...***

*Sustainability is something in my view that is not just 'we took the carbon out of the air, good job everyone' - those things are important to an extent. **But sustainability is also an integration of a different perspective on the self, life, and what our goals and objectives are.** And that demands a critical self-reflection process and I have come to see expression and creativity are key to that reflection of the self."*

## Creative Learning Tools

The arts have been recognized as supporting spaces for surprise and discovery around ways of addressing sustainability problems (Lineberry & Wiek, 2016). Integrating the arts into Environmental Education has shown to be effective in helping students practice forming deeper connections with themselves, one another, and the world at large (Anderson & Guyas, 2012). Individual creative expressions help us as a society process and vision where we have been, where we are now, and where we wish to go.

The arts are capable of preserving complexity within communication (Leavy, 2015). When working with diverse mediums, such as movement, clay, or food, there is more space to engage with the multi-dimensionality of reality. Artistic forms of knowing and being offer diverse ways of communicating through our multiple senses. Harnessing the creative is critical in communicating and addressing our heightened sustainability challenges (Lineberry & Wiek, 2016).

Creative learning tools are experiential activities that draw from the strengths of various forms of communication such as interpersonal, visual, movement-based expressions to support delivery of content knowledge. Throughout the article, we offer examples “from the ground” of how we use creative learning tools to work with the topic of colonialism in our class on “International Development and Sustainability.”

ANDREW: *“The creative side was almost really hard to get into at first, but once I allowed myself, it almost felt like letting myself go a bit, and allowing myself to experience the creativity...*

*I feel like **that’s when I started getting the most out of the class...** I feel like learning in a fun way, in a creative way... really allows you to absorb more information.... It allows it to resonate and stick with you...*

*Allowing us to have creative independence, it allowed myself to figure out... how I hold myself to the standard of ‘this is what trying hard now is for me’... **It almost allows us not to look to you for approval, but to look into ourselves for approval.**”*

The creative learning tools we develop and facilitate arise from our own processes of discovery. Sometimes, we develop a strategy that works well for ourselves, and then we bring it into the shared learning space of the classroom. Sometimes, we pick something up from another space we’re participating in and adapt it to meet the needs of our class. Sometimes, we design a tool on the spot while engaging with the class. We are empowered by Liz Lerman (2014)’s reminders that we are each “toolmakers” working on our own “toolboxes.”

Creative learning tools in and of themselves can produce interesting results. However, we have found that the culture and paradigm behind how the tools are used is critical to creating a supportive atmosphere for shared experimentation. We now present three design

principles that we have found to be critical to support the conditions under which sustainability can emerge in the classroom's learning environment.

### Design Principles to Support Sustainable Classrooms

As Sustainability educators, we have the ability to influence the classroom environments that we are responsible for facilitating. We recommend three design principles for planning activities that support sustainable classrooms: humanity, horizontality, and compassionate facilitation.

#### i. Design Principle 1: HUMANITY

Conventional, assembly-line models of education often dehumanize both students and teachers (Thompson, 2017). The complexity of individuals is distilled through the process of standardizing exams and teaching curricula. Once advancing to higher education, classroom environments are sanitized of emotional residue. Both students and teachers are expected to strip themselves of their humanity as they enter an environment for knowledge transfer.

JESS: *"I appreciate that you [Neda] **present your personality with us**. You're super goofy. And you don't see that with a lot of other professors. I feel like they just stand up they are like 'mraaa', you know super stiff. **It's just refreshing cause it provides a space where we can all be comfortable with our personalities**"*



Engaging the subjective dimension adds great complexity to a classroom. However, we have come to understand that if we want to change unsustainable behaviors, lifestyles, and habits, we must engage this subjective complexity (Manuel-Navarrete, 2015). This is probably one of the most difficult tasks for the facilitator, but also a challenge for students given the deep objectivist biases still pervasive in academia and formal education.

Given space limitations, we cannot offer a review of theoretical underpinnings regarding human subjectivity. It is important to know that our understandings of subjective complexity have been shaped by foundational literature in the fields of depth psychology (Jung, 1933; 1959; Neumann, 1969); existential analysis (Frankl, 1946); humanism (Fromm, 1956); and post-structural philosophy (Foucault, 1981; 1998).

We have come to understand that each layer of our existence – physical, emotional, mental, spiritual – has its own organization and own type of complexity (Manuel-Navarrete, 2015). Rather than shy away from subjective complexity, sustainable classrooms embrace this as a strength for supporting sustained, life-long learning (Parker & Wilding, 2012). Formalized transdisciplinary educational spaces can offer individuals opportunities to appreciate and work with these dynamics at play between internal and external worlds (Boyd & Myers, 1998). When all individuals are recognized with their full, multi-dimensional complexity, the learning that happens can address life's, multi-dimensional complexity.

When viewing “humanity” as a design principle to support sustainable classrooms, we refer to the process of first intentionally recognizing the qualities that make us all human, then designing activities with these qualities in mind. We now depart from the conceptual realm

to offer practical examples of activities used during our 300-level class on “International Development and Sustainability.”

### From the Ground pt. I

Central to the topic of International Development is the complex phenomenon known as colonialism. The historical invasion of lands, stripping away of ancient cultures, restructuring of power dynamics, and dehumanizing mentalities that permit violence are some characteristics of colonialism and neocolonialism (Sartre, 1964). While facilitating the course on “International Development and Sustainability,” we have come to discover it is impossible to speak of international dynamics today without addressing the depths of colonial history.

Many history lessons teach colonialism through the use of sanitized facts – names, dates, places – stripped of their emotional context. We have found that this “objective” method prevents deep understanding of the mentality, logic, and embodiment that fuels colonialism and neocolonialism. Without an internalized understanding of this topic, individuals run the risk of unknowingly perpetuating colonial thinking and being. In a field like International Development, where most often individuals from the “global North” are implementing projects in the “global South,” there is a strong likelihood of maintaining superiority complexes and asymmetrical power dynamics (Chambers, 2004).

GRACE: *“It was nice to learn about something that I had learned about something since Middle School and High School but in a different light. So with colonialism, **actually taking the time and viewing***

*it from an emotional standpoint, and viewing that wow, these horrible atrocities were done. And not just a purely academic, logical standpoint of ‘oh this happened’. But instead dissecting and really going through each case was really powerful.”*

MICHAEL: *“This class isn’t like anything like I thought it was going to be when I signed up. I’m really grateful for that because I was just thinking it was going to be memorize the date of this international treaty and blah blah blah. But I think this is one of the deepest classes that I’ve had.”*

Crafting lessons around the complex topic of colonialism requires creativity and care.

Through our experiences in the classroom, we have come to develop a number of creative tools that allow individuals to engage with the content in a multi-dimensional way. We share two of these activities to offer practical blueprints for how we teach critical content material while working with the complexity of human subjectivity to support sustainable classrooms.

Colonialism is a heavy topic that is critical to understanding the dynamics at play within the international development field to date. Given our context being situated in Arizona within the United States, we have focused this unit on the historical slave trade and genocide of Native Americans.

Letter-Writing Activity: To prepare, first watch a chosen assortment of video clips and written excerpts providing an overview and commentary on colonialism. Then, explore the web, books, or magazines for photos of colonization. Choose a photo that stands out to you. Choose a subject (who can be non-human as well) that you will be forming a

connection with. Study this subject in depth, get into their perspective, **settle into their context** – into their particular place in time and space... When this photo was taken: what could this subject have been feeling? **what was the pace of their breath?** who did they care about?

It is not important whether your responses are “right” or “wrong” – just build the connection. Set the mood for yourself, **prepare the environment** in a way that best serves you, turn off electronic devices... and then begin to **handwrite** this character a letter. Free-write, **without stopping to judge**, question, or criticize what’s being written. Write until you have nothing more to say... you will know when you’re done.

*RAVEN: “I felt deeply moved after learning about colonization in this way. I felt as though this was the best way to experience the subject materials. Writing the letter, for me, felt like **I was getting some of the weight off my chest almost** and I was about to **let out my frustrations** from learning this information onto paper through the letter.*

*I also enjoyed listening to my peers’ letters as they gave interesting and different perspectives that I would not have seen before. After this class session, **I feel as though a new lens has been added to my perspective on how I view the world, and I will carry this with me.**”*

We use the letter-writing activity since we recognize complex topics like colonialism require space for emotional processing. The process of free-writing a hand-written letter to a character witnessed in a photo allows learners the opportunity to form a bond across time and place. This activity invites one to find the humanity within our ancestors who were

historically experiencing various shades of colonialism. By opening a dialogue, we are encouraged to critically ponder our role within the phenomenon of colonialism that continues to be present to date. Creative activities like letter-writing grant students opportunities to engage with the complexity of reality. Working with reality using a multi-layered perspective allows for deeper internalization of the material. In the case of colonialism, this internalization showed itself when many students had the “aha moment” of realizing how their own minds have been colonized.

*ANDREW: “Colonialism is a way of thinking, not just an act.*

***I contribute to colonialism in the world but also in my own mind.***

*I have allowed colonialism to embed itself in my most vulnerable places...*

*I have learned about colonialism in almost every history class I have ever been in, but never have I addressed it in such an emotional aspect... **Being taught in such a logical way previously was almost like giving into it.”***

Colonial projects are enabled by a stripping away of humanity. We consciously craft classroom activities with our own humanity as instructors and our students’ humanity in mind. Welcoming the subjective dimension into learning activities allows for classrooms to be more sustainable. The classroom becomes filled with a group of diverse human subjects, all seen as equals, committed to shared discoveries. Power dynamics can be whittled away as the mindset of hierarchy is deactivated. This leads to the next design principle, horizontality, to support the emergence of sustainability within learning environments.

ii. Design Principle 2: HORIZONTALITY

We use the term horizontality with inspiration from Liz Lerman (2014)'s methods for "Hiking the Horizontal." Lerman uses the concept of the horizontal in contrast to the vertical, or hierarchy. She reminds us that many of us have learned to view the world with the lens of "better than" or "worse than" comparisons. We have the capacity to take the vertical and flip it on its side to create a horizontal spectrum. Rather than being better/worse, things become simply different.

An appreciation for the horizontal is similar to Keating (2013)'s notion of post-oppositional consciousness. We are invited to live in the space between "good" and "bad" and hold threshold theories as we stretch our perspectives. When working with the topic of colonialism, it is easy to continue telling the narrative of the "good guys" and the "bad guys." However, we know this narrative will be told differently depending on the perspective. Rather than perpetuate this vertical mindset of putting one group of people "on top" of the other, we stretch out the narrative into the horizontal. This allows us to investigate the complexity of why colonizers commit such violent acts and unpack the nuances of belief systems that build this systemic phenomenon. By working with topics in their horizontal complexity, we are more likely to transform the root causes of the challenges we have been historically facing (Lerman, 2014).

Topics that we cover within Sustainability classrooms rarely have a "right" or "wrong" answer. Rather than perpetuate the illusion that there are easy fixes or single solutions to these challenges, we welcome the messiness and discomfort that comes with working with complexity.

JAMES: ***"I was generally surprised by how shut down I could get in class. I was watching my body language and often I was far more closed than other people. Usually, I am not like this... I would feel sad or angry after class a lot of the time..."***

***But I have found that the frustrating and confusing things generally lead to good knowledge once you work through it. In that sense, this class may end up being of the most important that I have ever done. However, it is hard to tell right now for sure since I am in the middle of it..."***

The mindset of horizontality also supports us as we engage in the lifelong process of working with the complexity of our own humanity and subjective processes. Hierarchical ways of thinking have enabled unsustainable mindsets of superiority that leave humans with the illusion of entitlement to dominate the land (Raymond et al., 2013). Oppression, superiority, domination – these are necrophilic – fueled by destruction and the illusion of stagnancy (Freire, 1972). In contrast, horizontal relationships are nourished by life-giving properties such as embracing emergence and mutually beneficial dynamics (Capra, 1996). Making comparisons within the educational setting, Freire (1972) notes parallels between the relationship of oppressor – oppressed and student – teacher and comments on how oppression is perpetuated through an internalization of hierarchy. When a professor maintains this internalized hierarchy, it spills into the classroom environment. As a result, all participants, especially the instructor, end up suffering from an unsustainable classroom.

DAVID: *I have been trained into trusting only my 5 senses to judge what is real. My conditioning invited me to impose this sieving to any situation. If I cannot see it, hear it, count it, ... it is not real or it is less valuable. In the last decade I have struggled to create more space within myself to value that which our external senses cannot perceive.*

*At first it is difficult to embrace the uncertainty and the sense of lack of control that this entails, but then one's experience is radically expanded and the universe turns out to be an enabling context. A similar struggle takes place every time I enter a classroom. I need to remind myself about embracing uncertainty, relinquishing control, and abandoning my internalized academic canons so that unexpected outcomes can emerge.*

As course instructors, we do our best to maintain a horizontal mindset by staying humbled by our own continuous learning. Our experiences in the classroom have shown us that stepping down from the professor pedestal supports the creation of a learning community. Within a classroom community, the diversity of all participants is welcomed and used as a strength to creating a learning environment that sustains itself. The “instructor” becomes a “facilitator” providing fuel to spark curiosity and occasional interventions to sustain the flames.

BRAEDON: *“One of my favorite things that I have noticed over time was that both instructors had joined in all the activities that we were asked to do. I believe that **this decentralized the hierarchical structure that traditional classes have and allowed for students to create a better connection with both facilitators.**”*



As we explore what “sustainable classrooms” feel like, we remember the web-like patterns found in nature. Life on Earth exhibits network patterns that are strengthened by diversity (Capra, 1996). The horizontal embraces difference and welcomes diverse ways of being that span across a spectrum, rather than prioritizing a single way of being as “the best.”

Rather than standardizing methods of teaching and evaluating, we implement numerous learning tools that engage multiple types of learning. The creative assignments we use have structure to offer initial guidance, but are open-ended to allow the diversity of participants to shine as they interpret and create in their own unique way. Given the diversity of learning styles, of lived experiences, of cultures, it becomes necessary to use creative methods that are spacious enough to hold the complexity of each unique individual. In an increasingly interconnected world through immigration, working with differences is becoming far more critical.

Methods such as multiple-choice scantron examinations flatten this complexity and equalize across all students. However, equalizing does not use diversity productively. The mindset of horizontality embraces difference. There is no illusion that we are all equal, because we are not, we are different. Rather, we follow the principles of equity that allow us to not only acknowledge our differences, but to use them as a strength. Life sustains itself through preserving diversity (Capra, 1996), and so do classrooms.

We welcome the horizontal into the classroom in numerous ways.

- **MULTIPLE EXPRESSIONS** – activities are designed to harness multiple types of expression through video submissions, creative writing, theatrical performance, collage making, and policy memos. For other projects, we allow students the freedom to choose methods of expression that best suit them.
- **CIRCLE** – we consistently harness the power of the circle, where all can be witnessed and witness one another. We dialogue in council, often speaking one after another with the option to pass. As instructors, we are mindful of how often we respond to a comment and do our best to take up our fair share of space. We limit the use of lecturing to hear from the wisdom within all individuals participating in the course.
- **INSTRUCTOR PARTICIPATION** – to the extent possible, we participate in activities and homework assignments for the course. This holds us accountable in remembering that we too are always learning. Our willingness to be vulnerable alongside students often helps them feel more comfortable. This being said, we have noticed times, especially in small group activities, where students feel a bit more performance anxiety when we are participating in their group. Throughout the term, this performance anxiety tends to wither away.
- **STUDENT FACILITATION** – we invite students to design and facilitate their own activities, giving them a sense of what it is like to have the responsibility of an instructor. We have found it refreshing and delightful to hand over the reins and watch the students' ingenuity.
- **SELF-EVALUATION**– at the end of the term, everyone who participates in the course (instructors and students alike) complete a thorough self-reflection portfolio. Questions range from asking about a time you surprised yourself in class to reflections on an

activity that did not quite work for you. At the end of the portfolio, you are asked to give yourself the grade you feel deserving of and explain why. As instructors, we are required by the University to give the final grade. We recognize that we have more power in this sense. However, we strongly take into account the students' self-evaluation when assigning grades.

### From the Ground pt. II

We offer another tangible example of an activity used to work with the subject of colonialism in the course on “International Development and Sustainability.” This activity of holding a “colonization exhibition” showcases the principle of horizontality particularly well since it allows for a spectrum of interpretations.

After the use of the letter-writing activity and an honoring ritual, we go through the process of collaboratively curating an exhibit. We invite the public to join this immersive experience and get their feedback at the end of the class period.

Colonization Exhibition: First, spend a week in “scavenger hunt” mode looking for **evidence of colonialism in your everyday life**. Your piece can be a physical object, multi-media, a performance, an audio recording, an interactive experience, or more! Next, bring to the group and share in a show and tell format. Begin to find common themes between pieces and decide how you want your piece to be situated strategically within the exhibit. Prepare additional elements needed (e.g. information cards; signs). The following session, allow yourselves ample time to set up the exhibit before welcoming in the public.

ANDIE: *“Following the exhibit I was so surprised by the depth of topics and ideas that everyone brought in. I am so proud of our tiny community... [I] find myself using my new ‘lenses’ out at different times. The colonization exhibit has made me question more ideas, and be really critical about what I’m doing, and the history behind the things I think are normal.”*

An activity like the collaboratively curated exhibit allows us to experience the spectrum of interpretations each individual has while learning about colonization. We work with the horizontal, respecting uniquely chosen methods of expression. The showcasing of diverse perspectives allows us to learn in ways we otherwise would be unable to. By inviting “the public” into the exhibition, we have a healthy amount of pressure to produce something semi-professional. To feel comfortable showcasing their perspectives creatively, students must feel safe and nurtured within the classroom environment. This leads to the third and final design principle of compassionate facilitation.

### iii. Design Principle 3: COMPASSIONATE FACILITATION

Learning tools are powerful in and of themselves. Yet, their potential lies largely in how they are facilitated. Facilitation is an art. It is a life-long practice of learning the how and when to do what and learning the why behind it all. We use this section to briefly address the importance of compassionate facilitation as our third design principle for a sustainable classroom.

Being in the position of a professor or instructor, we are granted power. This power comes with the responsibility to care for the learning processes of the individuals present within the class. In the past, educators have formed mentorship partnerships with their students, deeply caring for their holistic development (Foucault, 1981). We revive this spirit of care through a renaissance within our teaching methods. Similar to Thompson (2017), we commit to teaching with tenderness. We hold compassion in our hearts and are motivated by the ethic of love. We know love to be the force which allows us to care for the life and growth within others and within ourselves (Fromm, 1956).

JACQUIE: *“**Having an instructor who’s just willing to be open and share and is willing to go all in with this type of practice makes other people comfortable.** Some students, people like me are gonna be more comfortable sooner than others. But then I think the more students get comfortable, the more students will get comfortable...and **it’ll just have a domino effect** which I think happened pretty early on in our class which is really nice.”*

We recognize the vulnerability inherent in the process of learning and unlearning, especially when creativity is involved. We do our best to nurture membranes that help us filter between the personal and the professional. We recognize these boundaries can become seamless, yet do our best to expose only what feels appropriate. We practice nimbleness and flexibility, being highly adaptive and attentive to what is alive in any given moment (Lerman, 2014). We are cautious and only work with tools that we feel prepared to work with. We supplement our lived experiences with training in contemplative practices, artistic methods, and humanistic psychology to support our practice as facilitators.

The classroom can become a laboratory for collective experimentation, a playground where we can each discover personal lessons that are relevant for the group's learning. The joy that comes with such learning is delicate. As facilitators, we have come to appreciate the deep commitment to self-discovery that comes with the practice of teaching. We must be highly aware and attentive to the ways in which our presence impacts the spaces we are a part of, especially when we are given the power of facilitation.

Being a team of two, we have been able to support one another and offer any necessary checking and balancing. We felt prepared to begin introducing creative learning tools in the classroom since we had been engaging with similar methods in our personal lives and experiencing powerful results. We felt it would be inauthentic to deprive the class of opportunities for growth by relying heavily on lectures. Bit by bit, we began to bring different activities into the classroom. Soon after, we recognized a transformation in the ethic of the entire course. We placed a disclaimer in the syllabus to offer full transparency for what students could expect before committing to the course.

Experimenting with creative learning tools takes courage for both students and facilitators. Outside of arts education, creative learning methods are fringe. A facilitator of such methods must have the capacity and willpower to work along the border between the mainstream and the alternative. It takes patience, dedication, humility, and trust to stay in the middle – with one foot “in” abiding by the norms of higher education institutions and another foot “out” experimenting with freedom. We are committed to this space in between where we simultaneously appreciate formal education as it is now and push for the potential power it can have.

## Limitations

We intentionally present the limitations of this article in bullet format as separate (yet connected) threads of thought.

- WESTERN TILT – this 300-level course is taught at an American university. Neda received all her formal education within the U.S., and David was trained in Catalonia and Ontario. We recognize there is an inherent Western tilt to our work. This being said, we use creative tools that draw inspiration from diverse ways of knowing & being with the world to provide learners with cross-cultural experiences.
- CONTEXT– we appreciate the complexity that comes with the subtle nuances inherent in each context. In every given moment, each one of us is a unique individual, uniquely influencing the spaces we are a part of. Even if attempting to facilitate a tool in the “exact same way” as someone else, processes and outcomes will greatly differ given the context of the individuals, the institutions, the structures, and the land holding them.
- SOME ACTIVITIES FLOP – since we are in a state of constant experimentation, we recognize that some activities will not go the way we planned. We do our best to be prepared, having tested out what we can before bringing it into the classroom. However, sometimes, in the moment, an activity does not go how we expected. At the beginning of the semester, we are transparent with our students about the experimental nature of this course. We have them take time to reflect on whether they want to be a part of the process, and then intentionally commit to the classroom community by collectively creating and signing a manifesto.

- **SOME SEEDS WILL NOT SPROUT** – each one of us has unique ways of learning and growing. Not all activities will work for everyone. We do our best to offer an array of activities to address diverse learning styles. We do our best to take responsibility for our share as class facilitators. We recognize that we can provide water, sunlight, and nutrients to the soil of the classroom, but some seeds still will not sprout. Each learner enters the space from a different place and will grow according to their own pace.
- **SAFETY** – when beginning each semester, we spend time intentionally building an environment of safety that allows for the use of experimental methods. We devote time to community building activities each class to nourish bonds amongst the participants. Holding space for relationship-building is critical to fostering a trusting environment. Only then can individuals feel comfortable experimenting with their own creative process.
- **SUSTAINABILITY IS ANCIENT** – since the term “sustainability” became a hot-button word within the last few decades, there is an impression that it is a “new” concept. Yes, the official field of study is new. However, the mindset and philosophy inherent behind sustainable lifestyles is ancient. We honor the ancestors who have kept us future generations in their hearts. And we welcome the responsibility of becoming ancestors to the future generations who await their turn on this Earth.

We do not think we have “the answers.” We have found methods that have been well-received, and we feel compelled to share these with others in our field.

When activities do not go as we planned, we investigate.



When we become uncomfortable, we get curious.

When a student is triggered by an activity, we listen.

When we feel helpless, we ask for help.

JACQUIE: *“A lot of people say, ‘people suck, the world’s gonna die anyways. I’m gonna do all this stuff but it doesn’t matter.’ And to me, I guess - What are we saving? Are we saving a society or a mentality? Because the earth isn’t gonna die. It will be uninhabitable for humans.*

***And if humanity is gonna be living in this state of negativity and fear, then I don’t really know if it’s a society worth sustaining... I think in terms of grand changes of paradigm changes, if you can find this hope from within, that’s likely to have a ripple effect in your outer world as well.”***

### Conclusion: Sustainable Classrooms Adapt with the Times

Through compassionate facilitation, we have found it refreshing to embrace the humanity in ourselves and in our fellow learners. By sharing power and welcoming a diversity of perspectives within the classroom, the lens of horizontality builds our strength as a learning community. We cannot speak for others, but these methods of learning feel far more sustainable for us.

MELISSA: *“[T]aking this class, it kind of renewed a sense of ‘oh things aren’t that bad when you get down to it’, as long as the people are still developing. **Everyone is going to be moving along at their own pace, and that’s okay. We’re just developing...***

*We can solve problems... once we work on ourselves, we can work on the bigger problems. **If we're not helping at the micro level, we're not going to be able to do as good things internationally.***

Given the number of socio-environmental challenges we face today, being alive at this point in time comes with the risk of experiencing despair (Macy & Johnstone, 2012). And for those of us who have chosen to study and work in Sustainability there is an even greater risk of losing hope.

SKY: *"In sustainability, emotional burnout is so real. However, **when we experience burnout, we are unable to be present and to listen, which is what sustainability requires we do.** Through our [Sustainability] education system, we are perpetuating unsustainability through this feedback loop.*

*I've further become impassioned **we need complete change of how we connect to each other, ourselves, and the word 'sustainability.'** Especially in our [Sustainability] education."*

Creative visioning and the arts are being recognized as critical to the process of innovating for sustainability (Lineberry & Wiek, 2016). We have unique powers of imagination and the capacity to create worlds within our own minds (Jung, 1933). Creative tools stretch our ways of thinking and being in the world. Where better a place to practice our creativity than educational institutions?

MADDIE: *“I am grateful that this class has given me the tools (or the armor) to continue these reflective processes on my own, and I know that I will carry these new thoughts (and memories of this class) with me throughout the rest of my college career and my life.*

*It feels bittersweet to see this class end - as much as I would enjoy staying in our little classroom bubble, where I feel comfortable, **I know that to really actualize what I learned I must test it in the face of the “real world.”***

Formal education institutions are largely responsible for training the next generation of leaders. By transforming our relationship with the formal classroom, we have been capable of experimenting with creative learning tools that support continuous learning for sustainable classrooms. The times are changing and we need to help our institutions change in response. If not now, then when?

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## OVERVIEW

Chapter three is an open-access and adaptive, online toolkit sharing creative methods to cultivate curiosity and critical contemplation. Many of these tools emerge within the context of sustainability education. However, the application of these tools extends to wider audiences interested in both formal and informal learning situations.

The online toolkit is accessible at: <https://creativesustainabilityeducation.wordpress.com/>

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Q1: Do creative teaching methods support greater engagement with the complexity of sustainability challenges?

Q2: What spaces can encourage safe experimentation with creative tools to support sustainable innovation?

Q3: What is the role of curiosity in supporting sustainable, lifelong learning practices?

Q4: Can facilitators be empowered to continuously adapt and modify tools for unique contextual complexity?

## INTENDED AUDIENCE

The open-access, online format of the toolkit allows it to be freely accessed by anyone with internet access. The target audience is individuals who are interested in experiential learning tools. The title of the website is kept simple with three key words of “creative sustainability education” so basic internet searching can reveal the website. The content is in English, which makes it exclusive to those literate in the English language. Some content is

supplemented with video which somewhat increases accessibility.

This toolkit is a lifelong project that will continue to undergo updates, revisions, adaptations, and evolutions. As I continue to facilitate creative learning in both formal and informal settings, I will use this toolkit to help track my process and to share it with those interested.

## METHODS USED

The primary method used is lived experience. Experience with embodied practices such as somatics, t'ai chi chuen, raqs sharqi, and gardening have been central to understanding my sense of self from within.<sup>43</sup> There have also been a few courses that have significantly shaped my practice as a facilitator of creative learning, including: *The Atlas of Creative tools + Animating Research* with Liz Lerman; *Cross Sector Participatory Theatre Work* with Michael Rohd; and *Postcolonial Autoethnographic Methods + Spirituality, Colonialism, Culture* with Amira De La Garza. Experience participating in and facilitating various informal learning workshops has also notably expanded my toolkit. Central to this online toolkit has been the experiences collected while co-facilitating the in-person 300-level class on “International Development & Sustainability” with David Manuel-Navarrete in F15, Sp16, Sp18, Sp20 and solo facilitation in F18, Sp19 and working with around 150 undergraduates in the process.

I am empowered by my mentor Liz Lerman’s reminders that we are each “toolmakers” working on our own “toolboxes.”<sup>44</sup> The creative learning tools I develop and facilitate arise

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<sup>43</sup> Fraleigh, S. (Ed.). (2015). *Moving consciously: somatic transformations through dance, yoga, and touch*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

<sup>44</sup> Lerman, L. (2014). *Hiking the horizontal: Field notes from a choreographer*. Wesleyan University Press.



from my own processes of discovery. Sometimes, I develop a strategy that works well for myself, and then I bring it into a shared learning space. Sometimes, I pick something up from another space I participate in and adapt it to meet the needs of a different context. Sometimes, I design a tool on the spot while engaging with a group.

Tools have been chosen for the online toolkit if they were noted by multiple students as being effective for their learning process and if I have found them to be central to my facilitation practice. Testimonials from students are placed alongside respective tools. Quotes have been drawn from in-person interviews and reflective journaling. I have done my best to choose testimonials that offer a diverse array of perspectives and experiences.

## OVERVIEW

Chapter four synthesizes the previous three chapters into a showcase exploring how water can inform and inspire individual and collective learning for sustainability. Interactive exhibits and performances examine lessons humans can learn from water's adaptability. The showcase will be held on Tuesday March 17th at The Empty Space. Activities and performances will be ongoing between 4:40-8:15pm and participants are invited to come and go as they please.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Q1. What can we discover about the process of learning when it is equated to a process of changing?

Q2. Given that humans are made up of mostly water, what capacities do we have to undergo continuous change?

Q3. What do water's properties of bonding and phase changes suggest for individual and collective learning?

Q4. Would an enhancement of water quality contribute to an enhancement of societal quality?

## INTENDED AUDIENCE

This showcase is designed with a diverse array of audiences in mind of all ages. Research is featured through diverse mediums to increase accessibility. The event is being advertised

through personal networks, University email listservs, community gathering spaces, and public events pages. The event is free of charge and held in a relatively central location in Tempe, AZ near public transportation with free parking to encourage convenience. Participants in the event will likely include: undergraduate & graduate students, professors & staff of Arizona State University, community members interested in sustainability, and friends & family of performers.

## METHODS USED

This showcase includes sculptures, interactive exhibits, audiovisual pieces, and movement performances to showcase the research in publicly-appealing ways. Research is being shared in artistic ways to both describe and demonstrate how creativity can support sustainability solutions.

The use of multiple mediums for expression are central to the arts-based research methodology which allow researchers and audiences to tap into art as a unique way of knowing and being in the world.<sup>45</sup> The research and devising process has intentionally been spacious, to allow for emergence and surprise.<sup>46</sup>

I have chosen a small group of five women in their twenties, thirties, and fifties to work with. From September 2019 to January 2020, I sent the group monthly prompts to

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<sup>45</sup> Leavy, P. (2015). *Method meets art: Arts-based research practice*. Guilford Publications.

<sup>46</sup> Leavy, P. (2017). *Research design: Quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods, arts-based, and community-based participatory research approaches*. Guilford Publications.

contemplate on surrounding their personal relationship with water. At the end of the month, reflections were sent to the group. Starting January 2020, we began meeting in-person for bi-weekly and now weekly devising sessions and rehearsals. This group is central to the co-creation and co-production of the interactive showcase.

## PROGRAM BLURBS

The following are short descriptions of the interactive exhibits and performances held during the showcase on March 17<sup>th</sup> 2020.

### I. Performances:

#### **Water 101**

Two water engineers, Behnam and Zohreh Movahed, offer a brief introduction into the fascinating properties of water. We are invited to investigate how our relationship with water shapes how we value and use water.

#### **If a test strip could talk**

Parallels are drawn between the quality of our water and the quality of our society. Five pollutants are explored from a scientific perspective and a subjective perspective. Please note - this piece may stir up emotional reactions given the topic of water quality concerns.

## **#Change**

The four phases of water are used as a gateway into the ever-changing stages of life. Each phase offers a virtue that helps us embrace the inevitability of change.

Sound design by Octavio Muciño | <https://mucino.bandcamp.com/>

Special thanks to the water drummers of Banks Islands, Vanuatu whose art has been sampled.

## **A walk with her wisdom**

Our mother's womb is the first place we begin "wearing water."

This piece is an ode to the women who sustain life.

II. Interactive exhibits:

## **Tributaries of discovery**

Field notes from my process in the Ph.D. program are offered as pathways throughout the space. Intuition and rigor are practiced to bridge artistic and scientific ways of knowing.

Grab a magnifying glass from the lifeguard station if you want a closer look!

## **Temple of knowledge**

Gratitude is offered to the space academia hosts to pursue discovery. Hung are a fraction of the books that have shaped my graduate studies. This archway leads to the portion of the showcase focused on facilitating creative learning within the academy.

### **Gateway of ancestry**

Acknowledgement and appreciation is granted to the threads of ancestors who walked before us. This archway leads to the portion of the showcase sharing creative exploration of my personal practice of sustainability – knowing that I am an ancestor-in-the-making for future generations.

### **Sustainable classrooms**

I have supported the facilitation of SOS 322: International Development & Sustainability over the course of eight semesters. many creative learning tools have originated from this space. Engage with creative tools & experience student perspectives in this multi-sensory exhibit.

### **Re-weaving to re-member**

This multi-sensory exhibit shares my experience weaving a traditional Kelardashti style carpet. I based the design of this carpet on a carpet my paternal grandmother had woven for me as a child but was stolen during a burglary of my parent's home shortly after. Kelardashti carpet weaving is an endangered art being revitalized with the help of my husband's aunt who started a studio in the small village of Kaleno. I offer my gratitude to Ameh Fatemeh, Afsaneh Khanoom, and the lovely carpet weaving women for their support.

### **Exclusion zone**

Fourteen hanging hexagons store family relics that stretch along the time-space continuum.

This installation asks questions about the power of discernment and role of separation.

In its fourth phase, “exclusion zone” (EZ) water retains bonds in hexagonal structures like ice, but separates its negative and positive charges. Charge separation enables EZ water to generate energy from light. We are filled with EZ water - it is what supports our cellular function. Like EZ water, family is infused within my cellular makeup and enables me to carry out my calling. This piece is an homage to the selective ensemble that sustains my eternal current.

### **The making of a *shirzan* - a lioness**

I draw from the rich histories of seven women in my immediate and distant lineage to unearth the roots of how my perception of womanhood has been shaped. I use family recipes and stories as a gateway to understand one key lesson each woman has to offer. The kitchen becomes a space to value cooking as a legitimate and central way of understanding and relating with life. The structure for this narrative ethnography is greatly inspired by the novel “Like Water for Chocolate” written by Laura Esquivel.

### **Tastes of home**

While cooking and writing my way through “the making of a *shirzan* – lioness” chapter of my dissertation, I was reminded how food offers embodied connections with the Earth. I’ve asked friends to also prepare a dish that offers a “taste of home.”

### **Water sommelier**

Engage in a water tasting with our official water sommelier, Andie! Cleanse your palette as you prepare to receive water using your many senses. This piece was inspired by the work of Martin Riese, a professional water sommelier.

### **Make old things new again**

Work with Nona as she helps us weave together the past, present, and future. The materials used at this crafts station come from old fabric scraps and leftovers from the carpet I have woven. Sew a keychain & braid a bookmark! And then go have your name written in Persian on the bookmark at the calligraphy table.

### **Improvise with intention**

Join dancer Emily and musician Octavio as they open themselves up to improvise with the intentions you send their way. This interactive performance inspired by Dr. Emoto's research on water's ability to store intentions.

### **Guardian of life**

Have a seat and chat with Jess, our guardian of life. She's here to answer questions, receive feedback, and share about the behind-the-scenes of this showcase.



## CONCLUSION

The field of sustainability offers a space to address systemic challenges in their full complexity. However, a majority of the methods used within sustainability research minimize the complexity of the subjective, human dimension (Manuel-Navarrete, 2015). Arts-based research methodology allows researchers and participants to engage with the dynamic, multifaceted nature of lived experience (Leavy, 2015). Connecting subject matter to individual lived experiences makes sustainability personal which can in turn empower individuals to become ecocultural change agents (Milstein et al., 2017).

Sustainability education has relied exclusively on transmissive methods of education which do not encourage the type of critical consciousness needed for radical lifestyle and behavioral changes (Ferreira, 2017). Introducing arts-based methods into sustainability education enables students to practice skills such as acuity in sense-based relationships with the natural world and flexibility in their sense of self (Anderson & Guyas, 2012). The potentials to integrate creative tools into sustainability education are countless.

This multi-media dissertation has not only *researched* the power of creative learning for sustainability – but has also *modeled* the power of creative learning for sustainability. Within four separate chapters, a plethora of arts-based methods have been used, each chosen for its unique aesthetic power and explorative potential (Leavy, 2015; Hendry, 2009).

Throughout the project, water is used as a gateway into understanding the process of learning. Taken in the broadest sense, transformative learning is a process of allowing change

to take place – both within and outside of oneself (Dirkx, 1998). Given water’s cyclical nature, it has been metaphorically studied as a “master” of change. Water’s constant capacity to transform into different phases reminds us of life’s continuous movement.

Transmissive methods of education have been criticized as being necrophilic since they encourage stagnancy and prevent movement – both within an individual and the societies they participate in (Freire, 1972). In contrast, creative methods of education are biophilic – they encourage cyclical transformative learning.

Creative learning methods such as embodiment practices offer individuals new reference points (Fraleigh, 2015). These new reference points can be paralleled with the phase changes that water experiences. Arts-based tools offer opportunities to relate with ourselves and the world around us with a reinvigorated sense of creative empowerment (Gilbert, 2015).

My experience facilitating creative learning with formal classrooms and exploring arts-based methods for sustainability throughout this PhD process is just the beginning. This project is a strong foundation for a future career within Sustainability Education. Upon completing my PhD in May 2020, I intend on continuing my career in creative learning for sustainability through teaching and/or supporting education reform. I aspire to be at public institution because of the wide-reaching nature of inclusive learning environments. In addition to teaching, I will continue supporting the online toolkit of creative learning for sustainability I have created. Experiential learning tools are not only beneficial in higher education, but also for community organizations and corporations. I will promote the toolkit by facilitating

creative learning workshops in diverse spaces. I will also seek relevant conferences to the field of Sustainability Education to share this work.

Perhaps most important, I commit to learn forever – allowing myself to undergo continuous change.

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