

A Journey to the Temple of Peace

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On December 10, 2003, the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to the Muslim Iranian human rights activist, Shirin Ebadi. The women of the world, the Muslim and the developing world in particular, were overjoyed by this honorable recognition. At this time in history, when the image of Islam and the Middle East had been tarnished by the inhumane acts of a few, this award proved to be enlightening for the future of humanity.

I was in Dubai on my way to Hargaisa, Somaliland on a mission on behalf of The International Health Awareness Network (IHAN). My mission was to bring hope to the people of Hargaisa by renovating their only general hospital. I received an emergency message to contact my daughter. My assistant Laura Di Clementi quietly and anxiously accompanied me to the town supermarket and we bought a telephone card. I called my daughter. She cheerfully said, “Mother, you have been invited to go to Oslo for the award ceremony for Shirin Ebadi.” I was delighted and honored, but I also had made a promise to the people of Hargaisa who were waiting for our visit. I shared the good news with my friend who is a board member of IHAN, Dr. Suad from Jordan and her team. They shared my excitement and offered to undertake our commitment in my absence. The hospital’s medical staff gave their blessings. The children and the women gave me an emotional and unforgettable farewell.

After a long and challenging journey, I arrived at the Grand Hotel in Oslo and joined the waiting crowd to receive “the lady of peace.” The excitement and joy were outpouring as she arrived. Her infectious smile and her humility captured everyone’s heart. We crowded around her, took pictures and asked her our endless questions. She was soulful, cheerful and unpretentious. I was in tears from the excitement. The tremendous joy and pride were overwhelming.

The ceremony was in the majestic City Hall in Oslo. Mrs. Ebadi had requested a special group of Iranian classical music masters to be part of the artistic performance during the ceremony. They played a song of my childhood, "Anar, Anar." I thought of a fabulous idea as I was listening to my favorite song. What if I were to invite Mrs. Ebadi to visit Lehman College? She could inspire many of Lehman's men and women who are our future generations and agents of change. I continued daydreaming! What about establishing an Ebadi' Scholarship to nurture future human rights advocates and peacemakers?

Upon my return, I reached out to the friends and family of Mrs. Ebadi. The answer was negative, no matter how I pleaded. During my challenging life journey and from working with the late Dorothea Hopfer, one of the pioneers of the global women's movement, I had learned, "When there is no way, we will make the way," as she used to say. Fortunately I had the support of my good friend and long time colleague, Provost Anthony Garro of Lehman College. Energized and determined, I started on the journey for building "the temple of peace."

I traveled to Tehran and continued my search to find a way to secure a commitment from Mrs. Ebadi. My goal was to get a commitment from her to attend Lehman College as a keynote speaker. Upon my arrival, I noticed that Mrs. Ebadi's pictures and related news were on the cover of many magazines in Tehran's newsstands. I read them voraciously. I learned that Mrs. Ebadi was born in 1947 in Hamadan, Iran. Her father was a lawyer. Followed the path of her father, she received her law degree from Tehran University. Upon her graduation, she began working as the youngest and also one of the most pioneering female judges in Tehran. After the Iranian revolution in 1979, the new regime determined that a woman could not be a judge, and therefore she lost her position and her legal license.

Mrs. Ebadi was not bitter. She continued her scholarly and professional activities in research and teaching. She published numerous articles in the mainstream as well as in scholarly journals. She also published several books about children's rights, women and Islamic law, and the history of human rights in Iran. She founded several non-governmental organizations (NGO's) in Iran dedicated

to human rights and women's rights. She began taking cases in her practice defending intellectuals, journalists and activists who were imprisoned or killed because of their opposing political beliefs. She defended several well-known political prisoners, such as Abbas Maroofi (editor-in-chief of *Gardoon Magazine*), the Forohar family (political activists whose family members were wrongly arrested and executed) and Ezat Ebrahimnejad (who was killed during the university protests).

Mrs. Ebadi has been a courageous and determined champion of human rights in the most hostile of environments. She is an active member of the Iranian writers' association. She is married to Mr. Tavasoli, an electrical engineer, and they have two grown daughters. Their older daughter is an electrical engineer working on her graduate studies abroad, and their younger daughter is studying law in Tehran.

Friends of Mrs. Ebadi have many praiseworthy words to say about her:

Shirin Ebadi is an avid reader and also loves poetry. Shirin believes reading and poetry are antidotes to daily stress. She has a very close relationship with her two daughters. Both daughters are accomplished women in their own right. Despite her busy life, she always attends to the needs of relatives and friends. She believes in integrity and honesty in life.

Fereshteh Sari

Every tree of liberty blossoms in its own way. Shirin Ebadi is a very special and unique friend: free, honest and a lover of humanity. She is the product of the tree of liberty.

Fariborz Rais-Daana

World lady of peace: My congratulations to you and to the nation of Iran for the Nobel Peace Prize. For over twenty years, a group of Iranian women scholars gathered every Tuesday in their homes. Women lawyers, writers and professors got together and spoke about global and national political and social issues, poetry, literature, history and philosophy. Shirin Ebadi was among them. I remember her as an articulate and bright young woman, and I was impressed with her vast knowledge on legal and social issues. She was frank, outspoken and strong with

wisdom and sophistication beyond her age. Despite her busy life, she was the first to send flowers for a friend in the hospital and to defend the young girl Arin who died because of the abuse of her stepmother. She encouraged peaceful actions and gatherings in the mosque to honor Arin's innocent life. I wish health and long life to this courageous freedom fighter and loyal friend. As per her own saying, we hope her flawless spirit will be protected from the evil and corruption of power.

Simin Behbehani

(One of Iran's most celebrated poets and writers)

I was invited by my friend Mrs. Bahi Kaviani to the weekly gathering of Mrs. Ebadi's circle of friends. With much anticipation and excitement, Bahi and I prepared many copies of the letter of invitation from President Fernández and Provost Garro of Lehman College to Mrs. Ebadi. The gathering was in the beautiful and elegant home of Bahi. The guests were a group of impressive, powerful and dynamic Iranian women. I wanted to share the portfolios of these remarkable women with those who have preconceived ideas about the progress and status of women in Iran; they would have been stunned and pleasantly surprised. I offered the guests copies of the invitation letter from President Fernandez and Provost Garro for Mrs. Ebadi. To my disappointment, and despite the kind and generous efforts of Bahi, there was not much support for my proposal. My determination was stubborn, and my spirit was strong. I took a two-day soul-searching trip and traveled to the holy city of Mashhad before leaving Iran and returning to the U.S.

I returned to New York City still searching to find a way. A stroke of good fortune and the help of my distinguished friend, Professor Farshchian, introduced me to Dr. Homa Mahmoudi, a well known psychologist, humanist and a community leader who is a close friend of Shirin Ebadi and friend of the chief organizer of Mrs. Ebadi's program, Professor Karimi-Hakkak. Dr. Mahmoudi showed interest in the invitation. She graciously included Lehman College's event in Mrs. Ebadi's itinerary. The organizing committee and I were filled with immense joy and excitement.

Dr. and Mrs. Garro, my daughter Fedra and I welcomed Mrs. Ebadi and Dr. Mahmoodi, as they were about to leave the plane. With the excellent organization and management of Jerry Mathews and his team (the chief of the Department of Public Safety at Lehman College), we accompanied our distinguished guests with impressive police escorts to the Millennium Hotel and later to the reception at the Delegates' Dining Room of the United Nations. The reception was elegant and well orchestrated. Scholars, diplomats and dignitaries of Iranian and other nationalities attended. Dr. Fernández welcomed Mrs. Ebadi. The evening was warm, festive and friendly. Mrs. Ebadi graced the evening by her remarks about the importance of peace and democracy for all. Mrs. Ebadi then mingled with the guests and was greeted by her friends and the attendees. We all enjoyed the excellent and beautifully presented food catered by the U.N. under the special care of Jackie Lee. A young harpist from the Juilliard School of Music played beautiful melodies.

The following day, Monday, May 24th, Mrs. Ebadi delivered her keynote speech at Lehman College and was presented with the Lehman Leadership Award from President Fernández. Over 500 people attended the all-day seminar. We are grateful to everyone who attended the reception and seminar, those who shared and supported this exciting event, and who made this memorable event possible. Thank you for making this once-in-a-lifetime and memorable event possible.

On behalf of IHAN, I would like to express my gratitude to the members of the organizing committee: Dr. Anthony Garro (co-chair), Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs, Lehman College; and in alphabetical order, Dante Albertie, Lehman Stages; Dr. Bertrade Ngo-Ngijol-Banoum, Women's Studies Program and Department of Black Studies; Jerold Barnard, Information Technology Center; Maria Castro, Office of the Provost; Mable Chee, Office of Grants and Contracts; Dr. Annette Digby, Dean of Education; Dr. Sharon Freedberg, Women's Studies Program and Department of Sociology and Social Work; Jack Globenfelt, Lehman Performing Arts Center; Dr. Marlene Gottlieb, Dean of Arts and Humanities; Dr.

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I would also like to thank our co-sponsors, Ambassador Iftekhar Chowdhury and the Permanent Mission of Bangladesh to the United Nations; Ambassador Anwarul Chowdhury and the Office of the U.N. Undersecretary General and High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States; and Ambassador Olara Otunnu and the Office of the U.N. Undersecretary General and Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict. Ambassador Chowdhury has been working on the role of women and world peace for a number of years, and Ambassador Otunnu has devoted his life to the protection of children in conflict and war. I am grateful for their deliberations in our seminar as well.

They are many friends and colleagues who worked relentlessly to make this event flawless and successful. Allow me to mention a few: Dr. Vijaya Melnick, the First Vice President of IHAN; Dr. Mahnaz Sarachi, Executive Director of IHAN; Maria Castro, editor of the IHAN website and newsletter; Dr. Suzanne Stutman, Vice President of IHAN for Educational Outreach; and Leila Farshchian and her family for their generous contribution to the Shirin Ebadi Scholarship Fund. We are also grateful to Dr. Camran Nezhat, Dr. and Mrs. Mahin Khatamee, Dr. Akbar Ghahari, Dr. Joseph Salim, Mr. and Mrs. Zohreh Kassai of Rush Graphics, Mr. and Mrs. Beverly Bartner and the Sonia Alden Foundation for their generous support.