

1 Aghaye Gharehman khaahesh kard ke man chand daghighesh baryaeh khaarejiha
2 harf bezanam.

3
4 I have been asked to provide some light relief during the next few
5 minutes, and especially for those non-Iranian audience members, by
6 talking about my experiences of Iranian culture as an outsider. I don't
7 claim to have any deep insights but I hope you find it interesting.

8
9 I have been married to an intelligent and beautiful Iranian woman for
10 nearly 24 years. We were married (for the first time) as PhD students in
11 USA, away from most of our family. Very quickly I was introduced to a
12 world of dinner parties and intense conversation with fellow students,
13 of which I understood nothing. After 6 months of sitting, eating, and
14 letting sound wash over me, I could work out where one word ended and
15 the next started. Combining this with some memorization of essential
16 cultural terms ("chai", "polo", ``booss", ``nagon" ...) and reading some
17 books and tapes, I became reasonably fluent in spoken Farsi within a
18 year. Mostly this process went well. There were a few embarrassing
19 moments, such as when I was asked (``chai mikhai, yaa ghaveh?") (``tea
20 or coffee?") and I stood mutely while it was repeated several times,
21 more slowly and loudly. I was wondering what it means to ask someone
22 (``tea or brown?"). Question to Iranians: what did you call the colour
23 brown before coffee was discovered?

24
25 Much later I went with my son to classes in Auckland run by Mrs Soofieh
26 Sohrab. As an aside, the quality of some of these early resources was
27 variable [parrot pic]. In the age of the WWW, there are excellent
28 resources available and I will list a few on my website for anyone
29 interested to read after tonight.

30
31 There are obviously many words in Farsi that have no direct counterpart
32 in English, such as ``taarof" (the practice of offering and refusing
33 gifts well beyond the point of exhaustion).[taarof pic] In the other
34 direction, it is odd that Farsi doesn't have an exact equivalent of
35 ``already". Although that is not so strange in my household with our
36 workload, because the phrase "I've already done that" never comes up.

37
38 The hardest part of learning Farsi for me was simply the vocabulary,
39 because there are so many very foreign-looking words. Persian is easier
40 to learn for Europeans than say Arabic (because it belongs to the
41 Indo-European language family), but it does require a lot of
42 memorization. However the grammar is not difficult: there are no

43 genders, tricky cases, etc, such as with German. Pronunciation is not
44 hard except for two sounds (kh and gh) which most English speakers can't
45 manage. In the other direction, it is quite amusing to ask Iranians to
46 say English words like ``thwart", ``worthy", etc).

47
48 I think it is clear that I had more talent at languages, and more
49 motivation, than many people. But I think it is only reasonable to make
50 a good effort to understand people. As a student I met an American who
51 married a woman called Khusheh and who couldn't get a better
52 approximation than ``Gushy". Many of my wife's colleagues can't seem to
53 manage her simple two-syllable name with only one vowel. We have been to
54 a wedding in Auckland where the Iranian side of the family was sidelined
55 by the English side, who made no effort whatsoever to learn anything
56 about them. That is simply unacceptably rude in my opinion.

57
58 A huge part of Iranian culture revolves around food. Fortunately or
59 unfortunately I like almost all the standard dishes. However I am pretty
60 sure that unless you learn to like doogh before age 10, you never
61 will.[doogh pic] In the first year I gained about 15kg on the relentless
62 diet of rice, always accompanied by some tasty khoresh. Sophia Loren
63 famously said ``all you see I owe to spaghetti".[SL slide] Well, all you
64 see I owe to rice. Before [slide] and after [slide].

65
66 In addition to the long-term danger of overeating, there are some
67 short-term dangers. My first introduction to Iranian food (and Iranians)
68 was when a fellow undergraduate student in Christchurch offered me
69 pistachios, which I had never seen before, and I tried to eat some with
70 the shell still on. Luckily I still have all my teeth.

71
72 I have visited Iran twice, in 1992 and 2011. On the first visit in less
73 than 3 weeks we visited Tehran, Esfahan, Shiraz and Mashhad. Touristic
74 highlights include entering the Imam Reza mosque, and seeing the ruins
75 of Persepolis. [slide] Incidentally I saw there graffiti written by H.M.
76 Stanley, the reporter who famously said "Dr Livingstone, I presume" in
77 Africa the following year. [slide]

78
79 Foreigners were very few and far between then. I recall seeing two
80 Germans on a motorbike and a busload of Koreans. In Mashhad many people
81 turned to look at me in the street and I was asked whether I was
82 Russian. One man followed me around in Esfahan to practise his English,
83 and told me about his time as a POW in Iraq. We had to make reservations
84 for accommodation in advance through some government agency. On arriving

85 at our hotel in Shiraz I was greeted by the manager, a short bald but
86 impeccably groomed man, as though I was his long lost brother: "Jack
87 Vilson"! Another memorable moment came on the bus in Esfahan when a not
88 overly bright man called out to me: "khaareji harf bezan!" (talk
89 foreign). Even to be allowed to stay in a hotel room with my wife, we
90 had to be married for the second time.

91
92 One thing that particularly surprised me on my first visit was seeing
93 an Iranian chess magazine on sale in the airport, covering the
94 Fischer-Spassky second match in Serbia. That level of interest in
95 "intellectual" pursuits is impossible to imagine in New Zealand.

96
97 Highlights of the second visit included a day trip to Kashan (by bus -
98 for about US\$5, a comfortable seat, movie and meal) where I learned
99 about Amir Kabir. I also went skiing at Tochal. The latter was very
100 impressive, because it was almost empty. We met some Lufthansa aircrew
101 enjoying the 24-hour visa they are given when flying into Tehran. From a
102 selfish point of view, it is good that Iran's relations with other
103 countries are so poor, because otherwise it might be swamped with
104 tourists. There is so much to see. The small things like the man
105 shouting ``Ye basteh hezar" at the Tajrish bazaar stick in my memory. As
106 does the very old woman, barely able to walk, offering some bread to my
107 3-year old son, a complete stranger.

108
109 Iranian traditional ceremonies have been a big part of my life, and
110 mostly very enjoyable. From the third wedding where I mistook incense
111 for confetti [slide] to the setting of the haft sin and many Noruz
112 celebrations including those in midwestern USA when 21 March is still
113 deep in winter and we once had to drive through a snowstorm to get to the
114 party. My least favourite ceremony is refusing chai for the hundredth
115 time from people who just couldn't understand that there might exist
116 people who don't drink tea.[slide] These traditional celebrations are
117 really important. I am sure that Chaharshanbeh suri will outlive any
118 number of regimes and religions.

119
120 Iranians are everywhere in the world, it seems. The governments of the
121 last few decades have made young educated people Iran's greatest export.
122 The visa restrictions and other inconveniences that I have seen imposed
123 on really impressive students and excellent young people are sometimes
124 heartbreaking. NZ seems to have become much tougher recently in this
125 area. However despite this my own university has close to 100 Iranian
126 PhD students. Some of these students are really impressive, with deep

127 knowledge of music and literature in addition to their skills in
128 mathematical sciences and engineering. I will just mention a newly
129 formed Persian music club at the University of Auckland, run by some of
130 these people (one of whom is performing here tonight). One observation
131 that I would like to make to Iranians is that compared to Westerners
132 they don't really have much experience at belonging to clubs and
133 organizations where compromise with complete strangers is necessary. I
134 do feel strongly that democracy can't really take hold in a country
135 without this kind of grassroots practice. So I really wish this club
136 well.

137
138 Obviously Persian literature and music is immensely important to
139 national identity. Without getting into a debate over what "real"
140 Iranian culture is, it is clear to me that Iranian culture would have
141 progressed perfectly well if Arabs and Islam had never existed. I have
142 only sampled a small amount of the huge amount of literature and music.
143 My first exposure was to Marzieh, Delkash and Googoosh at home, then the
144 traditional songs of Pari Zangeneh and older popular singers like
145 Mohammad Noori, Viguen and Aref, and classical ones like Shahram Nazeri.
146 Although Iranian music uses different scales to classical Western music,
147 I didn't find it hard to listen to or unpleasant (as for example some
148 Indian or Chinese music can be). I have learned to sing some songs (not
149 today!) from Barun Barun to Morgh-e-Sahar and Barg-e-Khazaan.

150
151 Among poets, Omar Khayyam is considered to be more accessible than most,
152 and I have only read the approximate translation by Edward Fitzgerald.
153 However I have memorized a few in Farsi, and forgotten a few more. I am
154 attracted to Khayyam's view of the world, as a fellow mathematician
155 [slide]. The more mystical and religious poets like Rumi, Sa'adi and
156 Hafez I don't really understand or relate to as well. In prose I have
157 read only English translations of Simin Daneshvar's Savushun and Iraj
158 Pezeshk's Uncle Napoleon. I still hope to read something substantial in
159 Farsi, but I don't even have time these days to read fiction in English,
160 so this may have to wait a few years.

161
162 I have had some amazing experiences since joining (in some sense) the
163 Iranian community. The hospitality and genuine friendliness of Iranians
164 never ceases to amaze me, especially given how difficult their recent
165 history has been. Anthony Bourdain, the travelling TV chef, recently
166 visited Iran and talked about being killed with kindness. That attitude
167 to visitors has been there for hundreds of years at least. Life has
168 been tough in the last 35 years, with relations with other countries

169 being bad. The excitement I saw in 1998 in a Chicago restaurant when
170 Iran played USA in the World Cup showed just how starved Iranians have
171 been of normal contact. Eventually even Iran will be globalized and its
172 people will join the world in their rightful place. I very much hope
173 that they can do this while not losing their great cultural treasures,
174 some of which are on display here tonight.

175

176

177 Thank you - sepaas gozaaram.

178