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Once Iran from my past, but no longer

Love who you are and forget about Sally Field

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When I was young, I would deny my Iranian background. Most kids don't like to be different. My skin was a little browner than others, and my mom made "exotic" food. There wasn't much of a Persian community in Canada, and after the Iranian Revolution in 1979, when students in Tehran took a bunch of Americans hostage, I worried that my classmates would find out my family had come from the enemy land. I didn't like being called a terrorist. I resented my Persian roots.

People would ask if my name was French. It's not, but I would shrug and nod. I figured that was different from lying. And if others thought I was French, I could become a handsome soccer star like Michel Platini. I was aware of the great tradition of French culture -- thinkers, painters, writers, sexy film stars and uber-cool singers. Artists (and Platini) from France had made the global case for their culture to be revered. No one made jokes about bombing France because they were our allies and good at soccer.

Things changed when I entered university. I came out of the ethnic closet when the racially offensive American film *Not Without My Daughter* was released in the early 1990s. In this ridiculous Sally Field movie, Iranians are portrayed as vile and deceptive barbarians. There is barely a positive depiction of anything Persian -- just one big fat stereotype. I was angry. I realized that my teenage concerns about my background had come as a product of the ignorance of others. I knew that this was not the warm culture of my ancestry and I wanted the world to know the truth.

When I started to investigate the history of Iran's arts and culture, I was shocked at my own limited perspective of the Persian legacy. The music, dance, visual arts, influential literature and poetry through the generations was breathtaking. More so, in contrast to the negative characterization of the Iranian people as devotees to a monolithic and myopic theocracy, the undercurrent of Persian art has been very much about love, tolerance, diversity, acceptance and inclusion. The great Persian poet Rumi once wrote:

I hold to no religion or creed.

Am neither Eastern nor Western

□ My home is beyond place and name

It is with the beloved, in a space beyond space.

I embrace all and am part of all.

There has been some global awareness of Iranian arts and culture in recent years. Iranian film, in particular, has become a favourite of hipsters and filmfests with internationally celebrated directors like Mohsen Makhmalbaf and Abbas Kiarostami at the helm, as well as Marjane Satrapi's outstanding graphic novel-turned-film, *Persepolis*. For a small number of Westerner filmgoers, Iranians are humanized and understood in a context beyond contemporary politics and oil.

Still, for the majority in the United States, Iran is only really mentioned alongside terrorism, a prospective war and the bizarre debate over whether the next president should dare to meet with an Iranian leader. In a globalized world, Iran remains the victim of broad stereotypes and gets the diplomatic equivalent of the silent treatment from the West. Humanity gets lost the same way the great tradition of art and creation was forgotten in the exchange of bombs over Baghdad in recent years.

Over the past few days in Toronto, the Tirgan festival of Persian arts and culture was held at Harbourfront Centre. It was billed as the largest Iranian cultural festival outside of Iran. It was an important step in fostering an understanding of the Iranian people through their universal tradition of artistry. It's harder to demonize a culture when experiencing its artistic beauty. In all the talk of impending war, this is a moment in history when Iranian artists should be heard. - Jian Ghomeshi is the host of Q on CBC Radio One, Monday to Friday at 2 p. m. and 10 p. m.

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