

The Rules of Communications

by
Bob Magnant

Two of the real pleasures that are yours when you live in Teheran are the climate and the geography. It's high desert, much like that of Denver or Albuquerque, with brilliant blue skies, sunny and dry, plus the beauty of the nearby mountains. In the early 1970s, I was fortunate to have had the opportunity to work there as a young communications engineer as part of a foreign assistance program that was helping the Imperial Iranian Gendarmerie to upgrade their telephone and mobile telecommunications systems. The Gendarmerie, or the IIG as we called them, were sort of a combination of National Guard and local sheriff's units that were rolled into one and spread throughout the country. The IIG's job was to help the Iranian people move into the 20th Century as the Shah's modernization efforts reached into remote villages, some untouched by time.



After 30 years, I'll try to recreate a couple of vivid images for you that still burn deep within my mind. These experiences helped me to connect with this region of the world and with its people. For an instant, I will try to transport you to another place, where experiences transcend time and culture. I want to share these times with you to promote greater understanding and compassion for all people of the Middle East, as their struggles for change and modernization continue.

In telling this tale, I won't attempt to analyze the politics of the Pahlavi government or the role of the US at that time. In my mind, those are really separate stories and not very simple subjects. However, what I will try to conjure for you are a few pictures of a different world, but not of different people. They may come from a variety of roots and histories but, when you get down to fundamentals, Iranian people are pretty much like you and me. My first realization of that took place early in my stay in Teheran, on the street right in front of my apartment.

Teheran was a city of three million people then, sprawling across the desert plateaus and to the north, into the foothills of the Elburz Mountains. The economy was booming in 1971 and evidence of new construction was all around. Not only was the Shah dramatically overhauling the infrastructures of his vast country, simultaneously he was preparing its people for a celebration to top all celebrations, the 2500th Anniversary of the Persian Empire.

New roads, new businesses and new utilities were visible in almost every direction. The more that you looked the more that you saw, with the western educated middle class pacing the demand for change. And it was not uncommon to see both the old and the new side by side within the cities; Teheran was a mix of East and West everywhere. But out in the countryside change came at a much slower pace. It was said that if you pointed your car in the right direction, you could easily travel ten centuries back in time before you'd driven an hour or two.



There were foreigners, too; Americans, British, Soviets, Japanese, French and Germans - the list was endless. The Shah was building highways, pipelines and hydroelectric dams and buying Western conveniences, military weapons and all the newest technology. The world's businesses were there in force to help him shop. Consequently, the old bazaars were not that far from Ray's Pizza I & II or the Teheran Hilton. In some of Iran's cities, the government was in the process of creating domestic manufacturing capabilities through joint ventures with large international corporations. Foreign workers were scattered throughout the country, living amongst the middle classes. I lived in the northern part of Teheran, in a modest apartment by any standards, located in a quiet neighborhood. As most signs were written in Farsi and used Arabic script, language was the first obstacle that needed to be dealt with. Unless you read script, you had to use landmarks to navigate. And when you saw nothing familiar, it could be terrifying.

Looking from my front window, diagonally across the street from my apartment, I could see what I referred to as the neighborhood 'bread store'. Not much more than a small stone oven in a wall, it was where the local baker made and sold his unleavened bread. Called 'noon', it has been a Persian staple

for centuries. I liked watching the people come and go. The young girls and women of Teheran moved through the streets covered with a chador, a traditional black wrap or scarf.



They'd wear it over their head and their western clothes, holding it closed below their chin with one hand, as they went about their daily business. Oftentimes that hand, or their free arm, would also be clutching a piece of fresh 'noon', wrapped in a page from yesterday's newspaper. Sometimes men would stop to buy the bread, too. While most of them also wore western style clothing, some still sported a domed felt hat, called the Pahlevi. Long ago, the Shah's father had instituted a requirement for tribal men nationwide to wear it, to serve as a symbol of their recognition of the Shah's rule of government.

Early one morning, as I went out into the street on my way to work, I noticed a young girl on her way to school. School kids are easy to spot; they look the same the world over, even in a chador. She was walking by herself, perhaps eight years old, nine tops. I had noticed her, even from the other side of the street, because she seemed very intent on watching me and keeping pace with me. So I just smiled at her and I watched her and I smiled at her and I watched her and I smiled; I knew no Farsi. Cleverly, I thought, perhaps a warm, American greeting just might work to break the ice with her so I said:

“Good morning, Mary Sunshine!”

Without missing a step or letting her chador slip, my young friend began to transform. As her index fingers on both hands pushed the corners of her big brown eyes skyward, her pinkies stretched her mouth grotesquely and her pink tongue wagged wickedly as she bared her teeth at me and growled mightily.



I knew that she had seen the shock on my face - before I broke into laughter - for I caught that twinkle in her eyes just before she resumed her schoolgirl composure and skipped merrily down the street. And I'm sure that she was thinking, 'Just like shooting fish in a barrel' or something like that, but I'm not certain how that might actually translate into Farsi. Which lets me introduce my Rules of Communications:

Rule No. 1 – “kids do speak a universal language”

And that was only the beginning; I had lots more to learn.

After working in Teheran for the first several months on upgrade plans and related preparations, I needed to make a visit to the southern part of the country, to one of the many locations selected for remote antenna installations, to evaluate it's adequacy as a radio relay site. All that I knew about this particular location, as I remember, was that it was in the province of Khorramabad and that the National Iranian Oil Company had used it previously for telecommunications. I had learned a little Farsi by this time to help me to get around, but most of the people that I dealt with knew English, either from formal schooling or from working with my predecessors so, communication-wise, I felt that I was doing fine.

Our trip to the former NIOC site was slated to be a non-event. It took my partner and I the better part of a day to drive from Teheran to the Gendarmerie headquarters compound in Khorramabad. What made the trip exciting was that it was the first time that I had driven anywhere where I was staying alert for bandits (!) along the highway. It was already evening when we arrived at the IIG compound and we were beat. Going right to bed, to prepare for an early morning start, was certainly an idea whose time had come. I never felt my head hit the pillow.

I awoke to the sound of my host's knocking on the door. The room had all the comforts of a monastic cell and, in the

early morning light, it failed to change color. It was gray and the hazy shaft of sunlight that penetrated through its small, high window failed to add any color or warmth to it. In its own way, the room was much like the surrounding desert; it was very sparse and everything came in either shades of brown or shades of gray. But in a way, I learned that that's what made the desert pleasant and was what contributed to its charm. It was natural - and man had yet to scar or change it. It was still the way that God, or in this case Allah, had created it. And it was there for me to see today. I hadn't been in open desert before and I was actually excited about it, but I wanted to get an early start, get out to the site and get the survey completed. My expectations were simple; get the job done and then move on to another one, or on to some more important thing in life.



The time of the year and the altitude added a coolness to the air that would eventually burn off as the day awoke. But for now the hot tea and warm bread that we nibbled on, sitting around a large wooden table, provided just the right amount of fuel to get my fires started and get me ready for the day. There were four of us, two Gendarmerie soldiers and my assistant and me, who were making the trip to the NIOC site that day.

The plan was that the soldiers would drop us at the survey site for a few hours, to give us time to make our assessments and evaluations, while they continued on to check on things at a nearby Gendarmerie outpost. After that, if we got back early enough, my partner and I could head back to Teheran before the highway became too dangerous to travel. We were off.

We left the small, walled IIG compound and headed back in the direction of the main road – the one we had come in on - to the outskirts of the town, which wasn't a very big place to begin with. Shortly after leaving the populated area, we turned off of the pavement and onto a secondary hard-pack road that ran alongside a small stream. Through the morning mist, I sensed that we were heading in an easterly direction, based on where the sun's brilliance was coming from, with Teheran generally to the north. Because the haze was still burning off, only hints of the sun's reds and oranges were shading the distant horizon. All was quiet, with the exception of the whine of the military jeep's small engine and the crunch of its tires on the gravel beneath us. The jeep's color was a nondescript greenish tan and I'm sure that from a bird's eye view, if it weren't for the plume of dust that was following us on our route, that we'd appear to be just another brown blotch on this desert plain.

I'm not certain from what reference our driver took his cue, but after about 20 minutes of traveling on the hard pack he turned abruptly from the road and off to the right in a more easterly direction, heading directly into the sun over the unmarked, open plain. The transition was a fairly smooth one and the ride was actually not much different from being on the hard pack, and it may have even been a little quieter.

Sometimes the combination of wind noise and road hum can be mesmerizing and will affect you when you're traveling. I don't specifically recall anyone pointing out anything to me. Somehow, I found myself floating out across the desert and I

remember that my eyes had gradually become fixed on a dusty, cloud-shape on the horizon and that we were heading directly at it. As it grew, it began to take on color and character, shape and definition. Movement, masses, reflections, bits of texture. Animals? People? Nomads!

As we approached, I recognized that we were heading toward the center of a moving, migrating tribe. My mind began to scramble to drink in every detail; I had never seen anything like this! There were over a couple of hundred animals and I estimate probably about fifty or sixty people. The bright colors of their native dress, contrasted against the desert's earthtones and the backlighting of the sun, caught my eyes first. It wasn't simply fascinating; it was magnificent! There was a mix of animals - horses, mules, camels, sheep, goats, dogs and Allah knows what else; some were being ridden, some were packed high with all the tribe's earthly possessions – their tents, their carpets, their food, their children. Others were being led or herded in the direction of the migration. Some people shared the backs of the mules with the baggage or with the small children, while others kept pace on foot and helped the dogs to keep the goatherds in check.

As we closed in, the animals and the people slowly parted as they made a path for us. Actually, it seemed like everything stopped, just for a moment. Then we seemed to glide through their midst, almost hovering on the cool morning air. Color was everywhere! Reds! Blues! Golds! And what textures! And those sounds and smells! It was truly a feast for all senses! But before I had realized it, the migrating tribe was already fading to our rear and I was straining to catch a last glimpse of what would become my most vivid of memories. Thus, I offer you:

Rule No. 2 – “one picture is worth a thousand words!”

While this is usually true, it is not a rule that is written in stone. Even if I did have a photo of that desert panorama that's so clear in my mind, it could never come close to conveying all of the feelings that went through me that morning, when I looked into the eyes of those nomads as our jeep passed among the herds. It was as if an arm had reached out and pulled me into the pages of a special issue of the National Geographic magazine and, for just a moment, I had traveled back to an earlier time. These seasonal migrations, to and from the winter pastures, have gone on for centuries and still take place today. The Qashqa'i and other tribes still roam these lands and carry with them cultures and traditions that defy time.



Needless to say, I considered the rest of the survey trip uneventful. The NIOC location was another half hour away and when we finally got there, I found it to be a very desolate place. From the hilltop, looking out in any direction toward the horizons, there was absolutely nothing to be seen that was

man-made. And it was quiet – as quiet as a graveyard – and with the one exception of the constant wind in your ears, there wasn't a sound to be heard. In one way, those few moments of isolation on the hill gave me a slight sense of what the daily world of the Qashqa'i was like. Perhaps it also gave me some insight as to what drives them across the deserts and keeps them content there at the same time. I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to witness these people from close up and to see them as they live. Next lesson please.

The expression 'When in Rome...' is always appropriate for Americans living abroad. The experience of being a part of a community is always a rewarding one and if you really want to understand a country, you must understand its people first. In the Middle East, this is particularly true and perhaps more important. The cultural divides run much deeper there than they do in Europe, where the majority of America's roots came from. I think that it may be the cultural contrasts between the religions of East and West that make those gaps so visible. In 1971, nowhere were the differences more on display than in Teheran. I've lived in Europe and the Far East, but Iran was unique. On the surface, it was the blending of East and West; but in the name of religion, the mullahs would later rise up and overturn the Shah's government. But that's another story.

The work ethic and the family traditions of Iranians are very similar to those in the West. The one real difference that I encountered was this. Since the Moslem holy day was observed on our traditional Friday, sometimes sorting out the weekends could become confusing, "Did you mean Sunday-Friday or Sunday-Sunday?" Since part of our job involved dealing with support people back in the US, coordination occasionally became problematic. In general, we could usually work things out and on Persian 'weekends', we typically did the same kinds of things that any Teheranian might do; relax at home, visit with family and friendsor go on a picnic!

When you live in a city anywhere in the world and beautiful weather is a part of the package, the weekends are the perfect time to get in the car or jump on a bus [or climb on a horse!] and go out into the countryside for a picnic. In one simple activity, you get to eat good food, enjoy the company of friends and take in the beauty of nature in all its glory. It was not an uncommon sight to see an Iranian family stopped along the side of the road, sitting on a blanket with a basket of food and a samovar of tea. Of course there was a practical side to this, too. Thankfully, Howard Johnson's had never extended its reach to the highways of Persia, so roadside rest areas were exactly where you wanted them to be – where you stopped.



In Teheran, with mountains all about, you had the added option of taking a road that either went into the hills or off the beaten path and led you to take in a secret meadow or a shady grove or a scenic view. One bright, sunny Sunday-Friday, my wife and I set out for the hills west of town with a picnic lunch, our young friend Eric – an American soldier who worked with me there – and a spirit of high adventure. The 1966 beige Bonneville convertible, with a mere 110,00 miles on it, was still a vision to behold and a joy to ride in. The skies couldn't have been bluer or our spirits higher.

It's a funny thing about adventure, when you're looking for it, it's usually very easy to find. It was just about the time that I was either (a) tired of driving or (b) hungry when the most perfect picnic spot in the world suddenly appeared by the roadside, as if like magic! Or, as they say in Persia, ensh'allah - if Allah wills it.

We had been slowly driving up a mountain road that followed the downhill path of a crystal-clear river. It flowed along the left hand side of the road and shifted intensity with each variation in the terrain. It would change from pooling to raging in a matter of a few hundred yards, and it did just that as I drove over a rise and around the curve. A rather large valley, which reached back into the hills, was right in front of us along with 'the perfect picnic spot'. The river's path had snaked back several hundred feet away from the road just a short distance ahead of us, leaving a lush carpet of mountain grass, about the size of a football field, between the road and the river. Additionally, an enormous oak commanded the far end of the field, close to the river's bank. As we moved off the road and onto the grass, there was never any doubt among the three of us as to where the picnic blanket was to be spread.



Our cold chicken, garnished with breads, cheeses and condiments, tasted like fine Caspian caviar that day, under the oak in the crisp mountain air. I imagined myself as a prince of Persia, content to gaze upon my peaceful valley, with its fresh new pastures sheltered by the distant hills, and bask in the warm sunshine. Our oak was almost in full bloom, as were several of the trees that were scattered about the valley. It was June and it appeared to me that somebody had attempted some sort of cultivation on the opposite side of the river, which was

about 20 yards across at this point. As if on cue, that somebody – or at least two somebodys who had some sort of interests there – emerged out of nowhere and began to walk back along the far bank. I was at once both startled and surprised. ‘Where did they come from? Who are those guys?’ It was like a scene from ‘Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid.’

Two men - probably farmers in their forties – with thin, sinewy bodies that had been weathered by the sun and wind were walking up and down along the riverbank directly across from us. Apparently, they were surveying the riverbed in some manner, but for the life of me, none of us had a clue as to what they were looking for or what they might be doing. Maybe they were fisherman looking for fish! Perhaps they were travelers, looking for a good place to cross the river. I knew that they could see us there, but they made no attempt to acknowledge our presence or to communicate with us in any way. We sensed no danger so we just watched and what happened next almost stopped our hearts. Our visitors began to take off their clothes!

What caught me by surprise was that both of these gentlemen had nonchalantly pulled their coarse, full-length robes off over their heads in one easy motion. Suddenly, there the two of them were - standing on the bank, tan and bare-chested in the noonday sun, sporting baggy white pantaloons. Next, they both proceeded to roll up their pant legs. Now there was no doubt; they were preparing to go into the river, but I still didn’t know what they were up to! The water looked to be only a few feet deep. As soon as they waded in and began to reach down to the river bottom, the mystery was solved. They were pulling up large stones from the riverbed and piling them together on the far shore. They were building a crude break-water to keep the forces of the river from cutting away at the field that they were cultivating. Just because I’d never seen this done before did not mean that I didn’t appreciate the logic of it. These guys weren’t just farmers, they were civil engineers!

By the time I had reached the river's edge, my shoes were off, my shirt was off and I had already stepped out of my jeans. I wasn't sporting their brand of BVDs, but they understood that I was there to help. They watched me and smiled as I waded into the water and began to bring up boulders up from the bottom and throw them against the far bank. Suddenly, I now understood what they had known all along; that water had come from snowfields melting at the top of the mountains! And cold water makes you work much faster! We laughed and whooped and moved some rocks as quickly as we could to give the field some protection, but I had the good sense to beg off and leave the water before I turned to ice. They let me know that they had appreciated my gesture by clasping their hands together and bowing toward me as I retreated to shore, slightly 'bluer' for the experience. I bowed back. There were no words that any of us could have spoken that would have made that experience any better than it had been. Therefore, I introduce:

Rule No. 3 – “actions do speak louder than words!”

When I got back to our picnic blanket, I found out that Eric had been using my camera to record the whole episode and I was instantly ecstatic. However, my elation was to later turn to disappointment when my film was lost somehow in the international mail. While once again, I don't have a photo to reflect on, I still have those images in my mind and I remember the feelings we shared. They tell me that those farmers and I definitely understood each other on that day. I also remember that mountain water can be very, very cold at almost anytime of year and I haven't waded into a mountain stream since.



Freya Stark, one of the more romantic explorer-travelers of the last century, said it best in this passage from one of the books that she wrote on her travels in the Middle East:

“If I were asked to enumerate the pleasures of travel, this would be one of the greatest among them - that so often and so unexpectedly you meet the best in human nature, and seeing it so by surprise and often with a most improbable background, you come, with a pleasant thankfulness, to realize how widely scattered in the world are goodness and courtesy and the love of immaterial things, fair blossoms found in every climate, on every soil.”

Freya Stark, *The Valleys of the Assassins*, (1934) p. 269

Reflect for a moment on the aftermath of terrorist acts and the horrors of war; then communicate my rules to those you love. May you help to spread the warmth of human kindness around the world through those common bonds we share as people.

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