

Preface

Over three years ago, while working on the first edition of this book during the height of the COVID-19 lockdown, I suddenly remembered an old Persian song I hadn't heard in over fifty years. It was just a vague memory of something important for what I was doing, but I couldn't decide why, or remember the singer's name. The only thing I could remember was that it was a sad love song consoling a hopeless person to accept fate, given the futility of the odds.

It took some time, but when I eventually located a copy online¹, I found what had haunted me for months. It was parts of the lyrics that roughly translate as follows:

“What do you expect,
From a pebble in a vast expanse of rocks?
From a bird trapped in a cage?
From a gentle stream encountering a sea²?
What do you expect?
Come on! What do you expect?”

Listening to RoohParvar's captivating voice brought back the sense of dread and hopelessness that the song once created in me when I was a teenager. I have felt like that pebble many times in my distant past, keenly aware of the hopelessness of the odds against me and people like me.

I must confess that for years, every so often, I continued asking myself the question that the hopeless song asked: *Come on! What do you expect? What could I expect?* There was comfort in accepting my place in the world, the culture, and the social system that provided the loving and supportive community to which I belonged. Wasn't that comfort enough? Each time, the uncertain answer was *no*, leading me to seek alternatives by trying harder, even recklessly, regardless of the odds.

More than half a century later, I tried to express that answer in a watercolor painting in an arts class that I had started when I retired. When I explained to the group the idea behind my (admittedly amateurish) painting, everyone provided feedback. Linda, a brilliant artist in the group, saw an answer in the painting that I had not seen clearly myself: “Expect to create life and

¹ The song's name may be roughly translated as “Really [or come on!], what do you expect?” (*AAkhe' che entezari daary?*). Maryam RoohParvar, the singer, was once an icon of Persian folk music in the early 1960's. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=82Bc9Nhnqy8>

² The verbatim translation is “a stream or a spring, facing a sea.”

beauty, to go around the obstacles, to *become* the sea, not to confront it.” She added later that “I’d bet you have already done that in your life!”

I have thought about that statement often since then. Have I done that? What did my life look like when I was a child born in poverty in an ancient culture that was waking up to modernity and post-WWII socio-political challenges? How did my world change to what it is today? Have I been able to become a part of the sea, rather than confront it?

Until then, there had been a nagging voice in the back of my head telling me to write about that old world and the details of the journey from it to the present. The song and the follow-up thoughts changed that nudging voice to a raging tyrant shouting, *The stories must be told! But why?* I often asked, uncertainly looking for answers.

Almost three decades ago, a Mexican migrant who worked in a corporate tomato farm not far from the place where I lived in Florida asked me if I needed his son, a junior in high school, to help me with yard work. He told me that he was trying to keep his son away from seasonal work on tomato farms, hoping that he would finish high school and get a “steady job.” Over time, I had opportunities to chat with his son. He told me more than once that he wanted to go to college when he finished high school, but he knew there was little or no chance of achieving that. At the time, I could hear my teenage self in his voice, and I told him so while I shared bits and pieces of my own life story to encourage him. I never saw him or heard from him again after I had to move away in response to my own life crises. However, I have found him many times over in similar stories of other young individuals I have known in the past few decades, including my siblings. Perhaps more than all of them, when I recently found and listened to RoohParver’s song again, I immediately remembered the despair in that young man’s voice.

The old song wove these stories into a tapestry that echoed my voices of the distant past, drenched in uncertainty, despair, and hope. With that interconnection came a clearer answer to the question I asked above: Why should I write these stories? My lingering hesitation about writing this book, more so about making it public, would not wane. *I am not a millionaire, a famous politician, or a baseball champion*, I told myself. *Why would anyone be interested in reading my life stories?*

What broke the debilitating chain was the clarity that came when I responded to my own question. It included a hope that telling these stories might encourage the young people who are discouraged because they are facing the doubts of my past, or comfort the older ones who have traveled similar paths with few opportunities to tell their own stories. Like me, these older travelers not only have had accomplishments to be proud of, but also incurred scars to identify and tend to. The scars are the costs of breaking the boundaries of poverty and hopelessness, traveling across cultures, geographies, and time periods. Dreaming about the other side’s material and psychological modernity, many in this group have crossed the symbolic river (that

the name of this book is based on), leaving the comforts of tradition, familiarity, and tightly woven communities behind in their search for new opportunities.

Like me, for this older group of individuals, especially immigrants, crossing that symbolic river (or sea) has been highly stressful, often riddled with guilt for sacrificing the old to attain the new. Despite many accomplishments, there have been emotional and psychological costs in my own journey. I am the face of that older group, who may or may not be aware of their own costs. Hopefully, in my stories, they will find the comfort of understanding the scars and healing them, also recognizing that they are not alone in these feelings and experiences.

I certainly have not been alone in my efforts to write this book. Many have encouraged it and provided feedback. Among them, I am especially grateful to my friends, professors Isabel Valiela-Daveny of Gettysburg College and Akbar Aghajanian of the University of North Carolina at Fayetteville, who generously offered their time to read an early draft and provided feedback. Ms. Sophia Dembling's editorial review and suggestions were valuable in shaping a previous draft. Undoubtedly, writing in my second language, I have made linguistic or stylistic errors in my latter revisions that neither of them would have accepted. I apologize for that.

My son Cyrus has been a major driving force behind writing this book. I am grateful for his encouragement, as well as that of my daughters, Mitra and Ariana. To compensate for my memory lapses, my siblings have graciously helped me complete some of the old stories and encouraged me to write them. I have been blessed with their kindness and love! I am also grateful to Ms. Maria Lockard and Reverend Patrick Web for reading and providing general feedback on an early draft.

Stories are always impacted by the selective memories and interpretations of the storytellers. This is even more true if they are written decades later, in contexts far removed from where they occurred. Since this book is a collection of such stories, I am wary of possible memory issues, despite my efforts to be as objective as humanly possible in my reporting.

Throughout this book, I have tried to remain loyal to my storytelling role, refraining from making social-psychological analyses that my professional role might dictate. The readers who provided feedback on earlier drafts did not agree with each other on this. Some encouraged more extensive analysis, especially through an immigrant's eyes, while others suggested keeping the analytic comments to a minimum. I have tried to keep such explicit analysis to a minimum, at least until the last chapter, in which I ask and try to answer a few existential questions, also sharing my personal and/or psychological/philosophical reflections about the journey. If you choose to read it, I hope you find these reflections useful in your self-exploration journeys. I would also appreciate it if you shared your own thoughts with me via email (Tashakkori.Author@Gmail.com).