

# I



## Improvisation in a Persian Garden

WE BEGIN IN A PERSIAN GARDEN. In summer it would be filled with scent and color, but on this midwinter day, some twenty years ago, only the bones of the garden and its geometries were visible: a classic walled garden, with ranks of leafless fruit trees between patches of dirty snow and rose-bushes recognizable by their thorns. There was a row of dark cypresses along one end and a dry watercourse down the center, clogged with leaves.

I had arrived in Tehran in January 1972 with my husband, Barkev, and our two-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Sevanne, known as Vanni, for the beginning of a period of research, teaching, and institution building in a culture and language new to both of us, even though I had studied the Islamic tradition in the Arab world and Barkev had grown up as an Armenian Christian in Aleppo, Syria. The day before, we had gone to tea—in fact, cocktails—at the home of our new landlords, and when they heard that I was an anthropologist, they invited us to come with them the next day to a garden on family land in a village near Tehran, where they would observe Eyd-e Qorban, the Feast of Sacrifice.

At the same time that pilgrims are performing the Meccan pilgrimage, Muslims around the world are celebrating some of the steps of that weeklong ritual, one of which is an

animal sacrifice, usually a sheep or a camel. It is said that in Saudi Arabia so many sheep and camels are slaughtered by pilgrims that they are simply plowed under by bulldozers. Many families in Iran also sacrifice a sheep on the Feast of Sacrifice, and here the meat is traditionally given to the poor. When our landlady invited us, although Barkev could not come, well, of course I said I would, but I would have to bring Vanni with me.

On the way to the country, I began to have second thoughts and found myself running a mental race with the car, trying to work out the implications of the invitation I had lightheartedly accepted: to come and see a sheep being slaughtered, bringing a two-year-old child. I worried about what to say to her, how she would react. I went back over the memory of seeing the necks of chickens wrung when I was a child, before chickens came reliably headless, neatly butchered, and wrapped in plastic on little nonbiodegradable white trays. Those who eat meat, I told myself, should at least know where it comes from. That trip to Iran was not the first time I had entered a strange culture, but it was the first time I had done so with a child, and this was the first of many moments when the double identity of mother and field-worker led me down new paths of reflection.

I know now that to be in such a garden was to stand in the middle of a vision of the world. In the Persian tradition, a garden is itself a cosmological statement, a diagram reiterated in the design of carpets and the way they are used. Gardens are generally symmetrical in plan, but within that ordered framework the rich particularity is varied and relaxed. Gardens are bounded, walled; within, all is fertile and hospitable, but there is always an awareness of a world outside that is less benign, an unruly and formless realm of desert harshness and marauding strangers.

Water is a part of every garden, either flowing water or a pool large enough for the ritual washing that precedes prayer. House agents used to point out the pools to Westerners as wading pools for their children, but in fact these pools, reflecting and doubling garden and sky, focus the ideals of purity and generosity. The shah built a palace in the northern part of Tehran, at the high edge of the city, so water from the

palace garden would symbolically flow down through the city to his subjects. Every garden is a promise of the paradise to which the faithful will go after death.

It was a cold, gray day, and all of us were bundled up. My hostess, elegant in a fur coat and stylish boots, explained that the butchering would be done by the gardener. She herself, she said, could never bear to look on at the moment the sheep was killed. When we arrived we found the gardener and his whole family waiting: his wife, wearing the dark printed cotton veil of a village woman, and three children of different ages. Our gathering modeled the tensions of Iranian society before the revolution: the affluent, Westernized urbanites, the villagers, the performance of a ritual that rooted all of them in the past—all this in a setting with its own affirmations about the relationships between God and humankind and the nature of the cosmos.

The sacrifice of a sheep links several religious traditions. The Patriarch Abraham, we are told, was commanded by God to sacrifice his son—Ishmael in the Islamic version, Isaac for Jews and Christians; then, at the last moment, he was provided with a ram as a substitute. The story is emphasized most in Islam, representing the value of total submission to the will of God, a God who proves compassionate. Volumes have been written about the relationship between this single observance and older traditions of human and animal sacrifice and their echoes in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic worship. In the rituals of Passover and Easter, the recurrent sacrifice is reshaped in various ways: the shank bone of a lamb on the Seder table, the Lamb of God imaged in the single atoning sacrifice of Good Friday and its year-round memorials. There in that garden an ancient symbol connecting many faiths was still a real sheep that would bleed real blood.

The sheep was given a drink of water and turned toward the south, toward Mecca. Then, saying "in the name of God" and "Allahu Akbar," the gardener quickly slit its throat, letting the blood gush out into a ditch. I was holding Vanni on my hip and explaining what was happening, for children can handle such scenes (including those we see every day on television) if they see them in the company of an adult who both interprets and sets an emotional tone.

The sheep was skinned and its various organs removed. The gardener made a slit above one hind hoof and began to blow into it, forcing air under the skin to separate it from the flesh, so the body gradually puffed out and he could slit down the front and remove the woolly pelt. Deftly he spread the fleece, wool side down, on the ground, to receive the various edible organs one by one. "See, Vanni," I said, "that's a heart; every animal has one. Its job is pushing the blood around the body all the time." I wondered if I should introduce the word *pump*? No time. Intestines, stomach, liver . . . some were harder than others to explain, and my mind was racing for vocabulary to convey an understanding of the similarity of all mammals that would not trigger too much identification with the dead sheep. The fleece and the organs neatly laid out upon it would be the butcher's portion.

I had slipped into a teaching role, taking advantage of the visual aids to give a minilecture about each organ, using a vocabulary appropriate to a verbal two-and-a-half-year-old. Then suddenly, just as I was saying, "That big thing is a lung, see, for pulling in air and breathing, and the sheep has two of them, just like we do—here comes the other," I thought, with a moment of intense shock, Why, it's huge. In fact, I had never observed the death or dissection of any mammal larger than a mouse. Because I had an abstract knowledge of anatomy, distanced from the reality, and because I was preoccupied with Vanni's experience, it was almost impossible to realize that I was encountering something new myself. What I was passing on to her was not knowledge based on direct experience but a set of labels, whose theoretical character was invisible to me until I was jolted by a detail I had failed to anticipate. My words could hardly have been more abstract if I had started from theology or Biblical history.

Just as I could say, "That's a heart, that's a lung," we go through life, saying, "I must be in love," "Oh, this is seasickness," "This is an orgasm," "This is a midlife crisis." We are ready with culturally constructed labels long before we encounter the realities, even to the point of saying, "This is a heart attack," "I must be dying." We can call our fate by

name before we meet it. It will not retreat, but we are often relieved when doctors name our conditions.

The facts of the body both separate and connect. They testify to the links between human beings and other mammals and living systems, but they divide the sexes and the developmental stages. The body's truths are often concealed, so it is not always easy to learn about birth or sex or death, or the curious and paradoxical relationships between them. We keep them separate and learn about them on different tracks, just as we learn separately about economics and medicine and art, and only peripheral vision brings them back together. Experience is structured in advance by stereotypes and idealizations, blurred by caricatures and diagrams.

In the past, we might have climbed as children onto a big four-poster used in turn for birthing, lovemaking, and dying. In other cultures we might have grown up seeing human bodies of every age: torsos as distinctive as faces; breasts of many forms and stages, from the barely budding to the flat, long breasts of multiple lactations; penises as varied as noses. Living in a palm and bamboo hut or under a roof without surrounding walls, we would have listened at night to the sounds people make when their bodies are busy with the primordial efforts of pain or pleasure. We might have seen the interiors of human bodies as well, in places where custom demands the dismemberment of the newly dead. In the modern West, however, even intimacy is categorized and filtered through abstractions.

Anthropologists are trained to be participants and observers at the same time, but the balance fluctuates. Sometimes a dissonance will break through and pull you into intense involvement in an experience you had distanced by thinking of yourself as coolly looking on. Or it may push you away when you have begun to feel truly a part of what is happening. I was in that garden as a learner, an outsider, and yet, because I was there as a parent, I was simultaneously a teacher, an authority. Trying to understand and remember what I saw, I was also trying to establish an interpretation that would be appropriate for Vanni, one that would increase her understanding of the living world and her place in it and

also bring her closer to the Iranians she would be living among for several years. At least, I wanted to leave her unfrightened. Out of that tense multiplicity of vision came the possibility for insight.

That day in the Persian garden has come to represent for me a changed awareness of learning pervading other activities. Meeting as strangers, we join in common occasions, making up our multiple roles as we go along—young and old, male and female, teacher and parent and lover—with all of science and history present in shadow form, partly illuminating and partly obscuring what is there to be learned. Mostly we are unaware of creating anything new, yet both perception and action are necessarily creative. Much of modern life is organized to avoid the awareness of the fine threads of novelty connecting learned behaviors with acknowledged spontaneity. We are largely unaware of speaking, as we all do, sentences never spoken before, unaware of choreographing the acts of dressing and sitting and entering a room as depictions of self, of resculpting memory into an appropriate past.

This awareness is newly necessary today. Men and women confronting change are never fully prepared for the demands of the moment, but they are strengthened to meet uncertainty if they can claim a history of improvisation and a habit of reflection. Sometimes the encounter takes place on journeys and distant sojourns, as it has for me in periods of living in Israel, the Philippines, and Iran. Often enough we encounter the strange on familiar territory, midway through familiar actions and commitments, as did the Iranian gardener whose cosmopolitan employers had become half foreign to him. Sometimes change is directly visible, but sometimes it is apparent only to peripheral vision, altering the meaning of the foreground.

What I tried to do that day, stringing together elements of previous knowledge, attending to catch every possible cue, and exploring different translations of the familiar, was to improvise responsibly and with love. Newly arrived in Iran, I had no way of knowing what was going to happen, not even a clear sense of my own ignorance. Even so, I was trying to put together a way of acting toward my child and my hosts

that would allow all of us, in courtesy and goodwill, to sustain a joint performance.

Vanni of course was generating a novel performance too, trying to figure out who to be and how to react, the complex perennial task of childhood. She got some of her cues from me, but she also kept a watchful eye on the children of the gardener: the oldest, who watched as he had many times before, with a sense of occasion and none of horror, and the younger ones gleaning the confidence that this was an ordinary, unfrightening process taking place in front of them, but a solemn and even festive moment as well, one that would be repeated and explored in play.

So there we were, nine people differing in at least four dimensions: adults and children, females and males, Iranians and Americans, affluent urbanites and villagers, with differences of language and religion falling along the same cleavages. We were joined in the performance of a ritual, in spite of the fact that we did not share a common script or common doctrines. What was happening had different meanings to each of us. The contrasts were as great between the sophisticated urban people and the villagers, who were all nominally Muslims and Iranians, as between the American outsiders and our hosts. Men and women, nominally sharing the same culture, must bridge comparable gaps, yet for better or worse they have always done so, for all human beings live with strangers.

Occasions like this encounter in a winter garden provide the frameworks for future learning. Both on the scene and in memory, similarities are tasted and compared. Vanni was learning something about my stance that would affect her play with neighbor children in the alley behind our house. By now she has forgotten that day, but she would have remembered it over the next few months, and other experiences would have been matched with it and sorted out in her learning. She was going through the process of immersion in a second culture early in her learning of a first and having to adapt not only to what adults can explain but also to things for which they have no words. Children cope superbly where anthropologists must grope. I believe that participant observation is more than a research methodology. It is a way of

being, especially suited to a world of change. A society of many traditions and cultures can be a school of life. Even as a two-year-old in that scene, Vanni had to improvise not one but multiple roles.

The quality of improvisation characterizes more and more lives today, lived in uncertainty, full of the inklings of alternatives. In a rapidly changing and interdependent world, single models are less likely to be viable and plans more likely to go awry. The effort to combine multiple models risks the disasters of conflict and runaway misunderstanding, but the effort to adhere blindly to some traditional model for a life risks disaster not only for the person who follows it but for the entire system in which he or she is embedded, indeed for all the other living systems with which that life is linked.

Adaptation comes out of encounters with novelty that may seem chaotic. In trying to adapt, we may need to deviate from cherished values, behaving in ways we have barely glimpsed, seizing on fragmentary clues. The improvisatory artist cannot be sure whether a given improvisation will stand as a work of art or be rejected as an aberration. Trusted habits of attention and perception may be acting as blinders. Resources we have relied on to shape our lives may turn out to be dangerous addictions or spin into new shapes as the earliest versions of emerging patterns. Essential themes are not clearly marked but rather visible only out of the corner of the eye.

*on hand incidents*  
Under the pressure of the moment, needing to respond, it is easy to be captured by some central point of focus. A dead sheep. The spilling of blood and its impact on a small child. But there is always more in any episode, much of it at the very edge of awareness, most of it in flux, the relationships within any cultural tradition between old and new barely visible.

This same ambiguity sets new tasks for parents and teachers. Instead of passing on hallowed certainties and maintaining the status quo, they must make childhood an open-ended introduction to a process of continual change in which self-observation can become the best of teachers. If we knew the future of a particular child, we might be able to prepare that child with all the necessary skills and attitudes,

and we might say at a given moment that the preparation is completed and it is time for real life to commence. That situation, however, is long gone, if indeed it ever existed. Rarely is it possible to study all the instructions to a game before beginning to play, or to memorize the manual before turning on the computer. The excitement of improvisation lies not only in the risk involved but in the new ideas, as heady as the adrenaline of performance, that seem to come from nowhere. When the necessary tasks of learning cannot be completed in a portion of the life cycle set aside for them, they have to join life's other tasks and be done concurrently. We can carry on the process of learning in everything we do, like a mother balancing her child on one hip as she goes about her work with the other hand or uses it to open the doors of the unknown. Living and learning, we become ambidextrous.

Systems of education are everywhere in ferment, visions of promise countered with proposals for increasing rigidity. The Japanese are as puzzled as the Americans—ostensibly for opposite reasons—and you can find editorials about the flaws of education systems from London to Manila. This suggests that many proposals have too narrow a focus, are directed at local problems when the entire concept of education needs to be rethought. Looking at the place of learning in other societies and times from this vantage point, it is reassuring to know that everywhere most of learning occurs outside the settings labeled as educational. Living and learning are everywhere founded on an improvisational base. The discovery of new needs may be followed by adding units to the syllabus, but it can also lead to the discovery of how human beings make do with partial understandings, invent themselves as they go along, and combine in complex undertakings without full agreement about what they are doing. These skills also are learned.

Ambiguity is the warp of life, not something to be eliminated. Learning to savor the vertigo of doing without answers or making shift and making do with fragmentary ones opens up the pleasures of recognizing and playing with pattern, finding coherence within complexity, sharing within multiplicity. Improvisation and new learning are not private

processes; they are shared with others at every age. The multiple layers of attention involved cannot safely be brushed aside or subordinated to the completion of tasks. We are called to join in a dance whose steps must be learned along the way, so it is important to attend and respond. Even in uncertainty, we are responsible for our steps.

Starting from a Persian garden, this discussion will wander the paths of attention and improvisation in and out of four countries and across the life cycle. We will look for the sources of the bits and pieces stitched into improvisations and for the underlying stiffener that unifies; for the habits of learning and ways of building a repertoire from which to improvise, the metaphors that link one experience to another. Shared ways of seeing are socially constructed and currently, fashionably, criticized and deconstructed, but when you are able to attend to something new or to see the familiar in a new way, this is a creative act. I would call it a godlike act, except that the word evokes, for too many, a sense of distance and dominance, while seeing anew is a kind of intimacy; I would call it childlike, if it were not important to avoid blocking learning with the reminders of all that was onerous in childhood. In the ordinary creativity of moving through the world, we are both gods and children.

Increasingly, we will cease to focus on learning as preliminary and see it threaded through other layers of experience, offering one of life's great pleasures. There is this truth in reinforcement theory, that pleasure and survival are linked by learning. The capacity to enjoy, to value one experience over another, is the precondition of the capacity to learn, so that even the innate sucking reflex of infants is shaped within hours of birth by the rewards of success. Because learning is the most basic of human adaptive processes, we can hope that it will lead toward a relationship with the rest of the biosphere that is both satisfying and sustainable.

There is a spiritual basis to attention, a humility in waiting upon the emergence of pattern from experience. The willingness to assimilate what has been seen or heard draws other life into increasingly inclusive definitions of the self. Looking, listening, and learning offer the modern equivalent

of moving through life as a pilgrimage. Even death is a time to learn.

This is a book of stories and reflections strung together to suggest a style of learning from experience. Wherever a story comes from, whether it is a familiar myth or a private memory, the retelling exemplifies the making of a connection from one pattern to another: a potential translation in which narrative becomes parable and the once upon a time comes to stand for some nascent truth. This approach applies to all the incident of everyday life: the phrase in the newspaper, the endearing or infuriating game of a toddler, the misunderstanding at the office. Our species thinks in metaphors and learns through stories.

Many tales have more than one meaning. It is important not to reduce understanding to some narrow focus, sacrificing multiplicity to what might be called the rhetoric of merely: merely a dead sheep, only an atavistic ritual, nothing but a metaphor. Openness to peripheral vision depends on rejecting such reductionism and rejecting with it the belief that questions of meaning have unitary answers. Twenty years after it occurred, in a world increasingly troubled by ethnic conflict, a remembered ritual on the Feast of Sacrifice came to exemplify for me layer upon layer of processes whereby human beings can join and communicate and learn in spite of profound differences. The story grew into this book as memories from Iran resonated with memories of years lived in Israel and in the Philippines. A Persian garden has become a magic carpet. The process of spiraling through memory to weave connection out of incident is basic to learning, so that in this and perhaps other ways the text is a demonstration of its subject matter.

In my work, I have always been able to start from listening and looking, doing natural history along with the myriad small experiments that occur when one tries, tentatively, differentially, to join in. These are skills that spill over into all areas of life. I cannot know which observation will propose a theme that proves key to understanding, narrowing in attention to a pattern that opens out to many others. It is common to gather data in fieldwork and continue to mine that

data years later to illuminate questions still unposed when the original material was collected. Records of the past or of strange peoples in far places tell us not what always happens but what can happen, the depth of the human potential, the range of the capacity to muddle through. No single narrative is sufficient for understanding, no single model sufficient for aspiration. Even though they are spread around the globe, the societies—Jewish, Christian, and Islamic—that I draw on for examples still have much in common, combining elements of Semitic and Greek traditions in their attitudes, still all acting in the shadow of Abraham. The human range is both wider and deeper.

My mother used to list paths to “insight” in her lectures: anthropological fieldwork, the study of infants, the study of another species, psychoanalysis, the experience of either a psychosis or a religious conversion (followed by recovery), or “a love affair with an Old Russian.” The stories in this book do not cover all that ground, but the list is not a bad road map. Sometimes a narrative which seems to fit into one category metamorphoses into another. These are all ways of learning, by encountering and comparing more than one version of experience, that the realities of self and world are relative, dependent on context and point of view. Because we live in a world of change and diversity, we are privileged to enter, if only peripherally, into a diversity of visions, and beyond that to include them in the range of responsible caring.

We live not only in the presence of different cultural visions but with different individual modes of perception, with access to the memories of childhood and of alternative states of consciousness. These resonate with the many layers of vision within any single cultural tradition, the mythic and the multiply metaphorical, the sacred and the invisibly empirical, the insights of the laboratory and those of poetry and sleep. To become open to multiple layers of vision is to be both practical and empathic, to practice the presence of God or gods and to practice wilderness. Learning the paths of human culture, we are attentive as well to the undomesticated outdoors and the essential wildness spinning on in subatomic spaces, forever generating new patterns.

Courtesy is one of the great human inventions for bridging uncertainty. On the day of that ambiguous celebration of the Feast of Sacrifice, the gardener's wife brought glasses of tea as the shadows lengthened. Our landlords packed the meat in plastic to take to Tehran, where it would be frozen to share with family members. We got in the car and rode back into the city, with Vanni falling asleep on my lap. We were in Iran, increasingly at home, for most of the next seven years, until the revolution.

By now, that wealthy urban couple may be outside the country, learning to live in a new place. One of the gardener's sons may have grown up to die in the war with Iraq or been drafted to meet other new challenges, while the daughters have been held in more narrow roles. Everyone's life has been redirected by political change. Yet the revolution that occurred seven years later was present in that garden, present in the class differences and the ambivalent relationship to tradition of the wealthy urban landowners, the cultural disparities between them and the villagers they were employing, the suspect presence of a foreigner. Iran was a society in which ways of understanding became unmanageably disparate, for the rise of fundamentalism within any tradition is always a symptom of the unwillingness to try to sustain joint performances across disparate codes—or, to put it differently, to live in ambiguity, a life that requires constant learning. The risk of such a failure is the challenge that faces our society—our entire species—today.

That brief encounter in a Persian garden offered its participants many kinds of experience. There was room for hostility and anxiety, for fear of strangeness and distaste at reminders of the flesh and of mortality. There was room for awe in the presence of one of humankind's transcendent visions imposing its abstract geometries, for in Islam all space is ordered in relation to Mecca and all time in relation to salvation and judgment day. The sacred was represented and so was the organic, intimacy and strangeness. There was room for boredom and for embarrassment and awkwardness. With so many layers of possibility, there was room for a great deal of learning, but reason too for rejecting learning. I remember my fingers and toes growing cold.

In any experience other moments are present, and so they are here. We will move within paragraphs from a Philippine village to the Sinai desert. When we are in a Persian garden we will be at the same time in my New Hampshire studio. When I write about Vanni at age two I am accompanied by a teenager and by a woman in her twenties. Because the presence of many kinds of attention is central to my theme, I have included these other layers of awareness in my text; they are all relevant. *Insight*, I believe, refers to that depth of understanding that comes by setting experiences, yours and mine, familiar and exotic, new and old, side by side, learning by letting them speak to one another.

## 2



## Learning from Strangers

OVER THE YEARS, Vanni has often given me “desk friends,” small, friendly items grouped behind the computer to greet me during the day, familiar spirits. A small globe, blue and green. A beanbag salamander. The latest is an ammonite, the fossil of a prehistoric mollusk like a chambered nautilus. This graceful spiral of growth is related to the “golden section” of aesthetics and to the mathematical pattern called a Fibonacci series, in which each number is equal to the sum of the two preceding, increasing rapidly. *Cornu Ammonis*, the horn of Amen, Egyptian god of life and reproduction, represented as a man with a ram’s head. Ideas are coiled one into another, the Mesozoic decoded in the Renaissance and architecture meeting with biology in what H. E. Huntley calls “mathematical beauty.”

These tokens came with me to the MacDowell Colony, the artists’ colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire, where much of this book was written, along with reminders of the countries where I have worked. Each of us—writers, painters, composers spending a month or two in residence—had a studio in the woods for pursuing separate visions, where no one came unless invited. The studios of writers are the smallest, needing little but a worktable, but I chose what I brought carefully, spaced out where it would catch my eye to evoke the memories I was seeking to connect.