

Weaving Peace in Tehran

by Meghan Nuttall Sayres

Published in *Persian Heritage Journal* July, 2009

Easter Sunday I awoke to Tehran traffic outside my hotel window. Some wrestled the tangle of cars and pedestrians on their way to mass at the nearby Orthodox Church. I prepared for my own spiritual journey, the reason I had traveled through eleven time zones and half way around the world: to weave a knot on Iran's World Peace Carpet, a project sponsored by UNESCO and the Cultural Heritage, Tourism and Handicraft Organization of Iran. For a tapestry weaver and author (my first novel was inspired by an Afshar tribal rug), tying a goodwill knot on this carpet, along with 700 others from 89 nations, seemed every bit as reverent as attending Easter Mass.

My desire to participate in the Peace Carpet stemmed from a long-held appreciation for Iranian culture, in particular its carpets and poetry, which are often literately woven together. On a visit to the carpet dealers' bazaar in Tehran I discovered several carpets with phrases of Hafez, Ferdowsi and Sa'adi or pictorial images of these poets incorporated into the design. I have always admired, if not romanticized, the lives of nomadic peoples and, like Iranian nomads, I learned to raise sheep, spin and dye wool with natural materials, and weave tapestries that are much like the Persian gelims. I discovered that colors have meanings and rugs contain amulets against the evil eye. Themes such as these inspired my novel about a young nomadic carpet weaver, which in turn led to an invitation in 2005 to participate in Iran's First International Children's Book Festival. I remember how elated I had felt that February morning when my plane touched down on Iranian soil. In love with Iranian culture, I could hardly wait to meet its people, with whom I bonded readily during that trip, often more easily than with people of my

own culture. Thus, when I heard about this UNESCO peace project, I couldn't think of a more perfect excuse to revisit these friends. It was also a way to release my long-held frustrations over the poor foreign relations between our countries and the palpable mistrust of Iranians among many Americans. I wanted to weave peace in Tehran.

The Peace Carpet stands in the Negaristan Museum situated within the Saad Abad Historical Complex, formerly a Qajar and then Pahlavi summer estate. After the Islamic Revolution it became a people's cultural park. The atmosphere in the museum felt more diplomatic than that of a weaving studio. Large posters of dignitaries who had tied knots on this carpet hung on the walls beside rugs made in all the provinces in Iran. The Peace Carpet is being woven under the direction of Jafar Shahabi, a master weaver and manager of his own family's respected carpet business, established nearly a century ago. The rug will depict an image of Cyrus the Great. It was under Cyrus, a sixth century Persian king, "that Iran became the core of the first universal, multiracial, multi-faith empire." He was famed even among his Greek enemies for his justice, mercy and generosity. Persians called him the Father of their nation. The clay cylinder bearing Cyrus' declaration of human rights is kept in the British Museum. Excerpts from this charter proclaiming religious freedom, elimination of slavery and equal rights for all will appear in a bed of flowers along with the words UNESCO and universal peace and friendship in several languages. Made of silk and the finest merino wool, it will consist of five hundred shades of naturally-dyed colors and four million knots.

Upon entering the museum, I was greeted by Fahimeh Naderinajad, the director of the Peace Carpet project. She told me the idea for this carpet was conceived by the current Saad Abad Cultural Center Director, Ms. Eshrat Shayegh. Ms. Naderinajad invited me and my translator to have tea at a table beside the loom along with Mr. Shahabi. Several times my hosts expressed their appreciation of having an American participate. They hoped the Peace Carpet would be a forum for both diplomats and citizens to gather unofficially and foster new dialogue. It was then that I

learned that I was the first American to travel here to weave on this rug. This surprised me since the inaugural ceremony had taken place over six months ago, in November 2008. While I was honored to be the first American, I was saddened that no one else had come.

I asked why they chose to create a peace carpet, as opposed to some other form of art from Iran. They said that tying knots is something many people are capable of doing and because most of the world is familiar with Persian carpets. They explained that this project also has an economic component because so many people in Iran are dependent on the strength of the rug industry—the shepherds who grow the wool, the dyers, the weavers, the rug restorers, the dealers and exporters. They said that in this economically difficult time celebrating this particular kind of art could help renew global interest in Iranian culture and perhaps help boost the carpet industry. But most of all they want to “export their friendship and a message of peace to the world.”

“Art is a universal language,” Mr. Shahabi said. “It cuts across political ideologies to touch the soul.” I looked at him and smiled, knowing exactly what he meant as indeed it was their ideal that inspired me to journey here so that I could be a part of it.

Mr. Shahabi turned to the Peace Carpet. “What are we waiting for?” Time seemed to stand still for a moment when I sat beside the head weaver at the loom. I ran my palm across the silken warp threads in front of me and admired the subtle hues of the earth-toned yarns dangling above my head on the loom frame. It seemed that not much had yet been woven, only the selvage at the bottom of the rug and six inches or more of the design, knots that would rise toward the ceiling to make up the body of this medium-sized qalicheh.

Like every guest I was invited to write down my thoughts, which will be compiled into a book and published when the carpet is completed. After traveling to cities around the world, the book and the carpet will eventually hang in the United Nations. Flags representing each of the

guest's home countries were displayed on a round table in the room. "Unfortunately," my hosts told me, "it is illegal to display an American flag in our country, so we cannot put one on our table for you."

I never thought of myself as nationalistic, yet I felt disappointed and slightly offended. But rather than let this one omission damper the respect and friendship we'd forged, I decided to turn the other cheek that Easter morning and let the issue rest. Days later, I received a similar explanation by an apologetic waiter in a restaurant, where visitor nationalities were celebrated by setting flags on diners' tables. He pumped my hand as he greeted me. "It's very regrettable," he said, as he ushered me toward a carpet and pillow-laden platform, an Iranian-style "booth," and then handed me a menu written in both Farsi and English. It seemed that everyone I had met—hotel clerks, henna mill workers, merchants, museum employees, students, bookstore owners—either gave me high five for coming to visit Iran or a thumbs up for Obama. They all praised his recent Nurooz greeting. Some Iranians even exclaimed when meeting me, "I love Americans and America!" It seemed these Iranians could do or say anything they wished in reference to America, except display the flag.

After my visit to the Peace Carpet I met a second personal guide and toured Shiraz and Yazd, driving hundreds of miles between the two cities through a high desert, dwarfed by the Zagros and Shirkuh mountain ranges. In Shiraz I made a pilgrimage to shrines of the classical Persian philosophers and poets, Sa'adi and Hafez. At Hafez's shrine my guide showed me a ritual the locals do when they come here. Sitting on the stairs beneath the columned cupola that shelters his tomb from the relentless sun, we opened a book of his poems to the page the wind chose. It is said that reading his words in this random fashion should help people find solutions to problems or fulfill their dreams. Maybe it was the mood of the sanctuary or the norange-scented air, but I had not a worry at all and felt in need of nothing. In fact I felt almost drunk, giddy with gratitude. Therefore after reading a few passages, nothing struck me as pertinent at that moment, just a few lines such as:

(O Beloved!) With him, my heart is fellow traveler. In every place where he goeth, be / The blessing of people of liberality the guide of his soul and body.

Not so for my guide. He gazed into the distance after he read the poet's wisdom and a smile spread across his face.

"Were Hafez's words relevant for you?" I asked.

"I can not answer that," he said. "Or my wish may not come true."

At the Persian philosopher Sa'adi's shrine, my translator read me a story by him that we found inscribed in blue tiles on the walls encircling Sa'adi's alabaster tomb. The tale seemed strangely familiar. "Once there was a traveler who watched a Sufi leave a caravan and go off weeping in the hills. His reason? Because the Sufi noticed all other forms of life were crying to God and he was simply sitting there." One reason I embarked on this trip was that I felt my soul would go to ruin if I simply sat idle while heads of governments continued to speak indirectly at each other. Yet, I also sensed something else, a force pulling me toward this journey: plans fell easily into place; the Iranian government readily granted me a visa; everyone in my family was in good health. Standing inside Sa'adi's domed shrine a space opened inside me. A flicker of knowing. Perhaps, I had thought, my coming to Iran served—or will serve—a larger purpose than simply appeasing my own impatience. Maybe the answer lies within this tale of Sa'adi or the words on that random page of Hafez.

On the road to Yazd, we stopped to visit the ancient site of Persepolis, the vast valley where Cyrus the Great and other Zoroastrian kings made their spring and fall homes. Before leaving the U.S., I hadn't realized how my itinerary directly related to the Peace Carpet. However, while visiting this southern region of Iran, I noticed my tour seemed to be unfolding added layers of meaning and purpose. I had not known the Carpet would hang in the United Nations, where Sa'adi's famous poem

that begins, ‘The sons of Adam are limbs of each other,’ greets all who enters that building. I couldn’t have guessed that Cyrus the Great would be depicted on the rug. The news I had read about it was that the design would be kept secret until its unveiling. Above all, no amount of foretelling would have predicted that I would meet the oldest weaver in Yazd, a good-humored, ninety-year-old man named Ramazan who had an appetite for adventure and a penchant for smoking all manner of things. He traveled miles into the desert with us to visit a Zoroastrian cave temple, reciting en route the works of Hafez and Khayyam. The gift of his company will feed me for years to come.

I had more friends to meet at the Peace Carpet in Tehran, and so I returned for a second visit, where I was joined by my Iranian friend Manda and Iran’s most well known dye master Abbas Sayahi, who is an author, a former teacher and actor in the film *Gabbeh*, about a nomadic carpet weaver. Sitting beside the Peace Carpet, he recited poetry of his own. The mood in the room was so convivial among us all, some who wove, others who didn’t, that it gave me pause. It seemed so natural to be an American inside Iran, gathered amongst new friends discussing art, sharing stories, jokes, wishes for peace, and copious cups of tea served in gorgeous blue and white hand-thrown cups.

This visit to the Peace Carpet closed with a meeting with Ms. Eshrat Shayegh, the director of the Saad Abaad Historical Center and a former member of parliament. Seated around a large oval table, Ms. Shayegh thanked me for traveling so far to weave just one knot. She also expressed her appreciation that I had spent many years learning about her culture to write a novel that celebrates the richness and beauty of Iranian culture. “You are not like others who produce movies such as *300*, which are derisive and insulting to Iranians.”

Ms. Shayegh denied that the project was her idea alone. “It was of the people, this is why we held the grand opening ceremony in Tabriz, a city known for its excellent weavers and far away from the halls of diplomats. This carpet, with its humble and simple message of

friendship, got its start in a natural setting. People who share this fundamental belief in peace will weave it. It is not only today that Iran is seeking peace. We want others to understand that we have always stood for peace, dating back to Cyrus the Great.”

Ms. Shayegh also said that women must show the world how to create peace. “Men have had their chance and it’s time for women to get involved and seek positions of leadership.” This is a woman, I thought, who refuses to sit idle. When she saw that my camera ran out of batteries, she reached for the clock on her desk and removed its batteries and handed them to me. It was a small but kind gesture, but her generosity didn’t stop there. She loaded my arms with books and CDs about Iranian culture and told me to email her anytime.

I gave my Peace Carpet hosts a copy of my novel, which they placed on their peace table. They also accepted skeins of my sheep’s wool as keepsakes. Mr. Shahabi hung my yarn on the Peace Carpet loom and said that he will weave it into the rug. My sheep Eiley’s and Lydia’s wool, American wool. It tickled me to imagine what my sheep would think if they understood that their wool is not only working for world peace but would be part of a masterpiece that in a year or two would eventually hang in the United Nations.

Before departing, I glanced again at the table where all the flags stood. Despite my new friends’ gracious welcomes and generous offer to weave my yarn into their carpet, it still bothered me that to look at this table it appeared that no American came to express hope for reconciliation.

I realize now that this flag incident has provided an opportunity for introspection. I am grateful for having experienced this “shunning” first hand. Bred in American culture, I have had little experience with being “unheard” and have been steeped in the notion that on these shores there is always a possibility that we might eventually have it our way. The Sufis offer another view. If every door is always open, is there room for

the growth that must come?

The Iranians' omission of a flag has also given me reason to ponder on a political plane, reexamine the past actions my country took against Iran that contributed to the climate that led to such treatment—essentially an act of deeming another's very presence non-existent. I now have a better understanding about what people have experienced from the many nations who have been left out of world trade talks. I look forward to the day when the new G20 becomes a G200.

What I appreciate most is that the World Peace Carpet of Iran no longer contains my nationalistic inklings, but threads of my own sheep's wool and a strand of my heart. Several people I came to know on this journey reinforced the positive feelings I have held for the Iranian people since my first trip there in 2005. I continue to find Iranians among the most warm, intelligent, artistic, friendly and generous people in the world.

I deeply appreciate the Iranians who helped me take this journey and shared with me my quest of weaving one small knot. This peace knot that is joined with so many others in this lustrous silk carpet, whose wondrously, multi-surfaced fibers are so suited to its mission—to refract and reflect hope and light. To shimmer with Cyrus the Great's vision of dignity for all, and to illumine Sa'adi's reminder of truth—that harmony in this world lies in the realization that we are interdependent, of one body.

The sons of Adam are limbs of each other, having been created of one essence. When the calamity of time affects one limb, the other limbs cannot remain at rest. If thou hast no sympathy for the troubles of others Thou art unworthy to be called by the name of a human.

Note: I'd like to recognize Jerry Dekker and Orient Star Tours for their expertise; Amir Haeri Mehrizi for an unparalleled journey; Jim Opie, who introduced me to Abbas Sayahi; and Janet Stuart, who tried to

accompany me to Iran but could not, due to circumstances beyond her control. One of the knots I tied on the Peace Carpet is hers in spirit. In addition, the quote pertaining to Cyrus the Great is from a book by Paul Kriwaczek *In Search of Zarathustra*, Vintage Books, 2002, pp. 171 and 184. For other images related to this article please visit my website or blog: www.MeghanNuttallSayres.com and <http://storyforce-storyforce.blogspot.com/>

Meghan Nuttall Sayres is author of a novel set in Iran *Anahita's Woven Riddle*, an ALA Top Ten Best Books YA and an Indie Pick 2007; *Weaving Tapestry in Rural Ireland*; and co-author of *Daughters of the Desert: Tales of Remarkable Women from the Christian, Jewish and Muslim Traditions*. She is at work editing an anthology of essays by people who have traveled, lived and worked in Iran.