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Women's Softball in Iran: An Autoethnographic Journey

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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Sarah J Hillyer entitled "Women's Softball in Iran: An Autoethnographic Journey." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Exercise and Sport Sciences.

Joy T. DeSensi, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Dulcie Peccolo, Ronald Taylor, Lars Dzikus

Accepted for the Council:

Carolyn R. Hodges

Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School

(Original signatures are on file with official student records.)

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Women's Softball in Iran: An Autoethnographic Journey

A Dissertation Presented for
the Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Sarah J. Hillyer
May 2010

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In loving memory and in honor of my grandmother

Betty J. Hall

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my family, friends, fellow doctoral students, and GSP colleagues for your loving support and constant encouragement. I would also like to recognize my committee members: Dr. Joy DeSensi, Dr. Dulcie Peccolo, Dr. Ronald Taylor, and Dr. Lars Dzikus. I appreciate your support and patience, and most of all I thank you for the ways you genuinely invested in me as a human being. To Mrs. Frankie, thank you for all the airport runs and your kind and encouraging words. Mrs. Jane, thank you for always being there to help me through each semester as a graduate teaching assistant. Lastly, I would like to sincerely thank Faezeh Hashemi, Zahra Yoosefi, the Islamic Federation of Women's Sports, and all of my fellow Iranian sportswomen and friends. Thank you for allowing me to be a part of your lives and for the ways you have challenged me to see the world differently.

Abstract

This autoethnographic dissertation recounts numerous untold stories about my journeys into the Islamic Republic of Iran as a sports consultant and women's softball coach for Global Sports Partners (GSP). Autoethnography as defined by Ellis & Bochner (2000), is "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural...Autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethnos), and on self (auto)" (pp. 739-740). Autoethnographers, writing within a branch of narrative inquiry (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), believe in the power of story and that humans learn through stories lived and told (Ellis, 2004). To date, the majority of the literature devoted to Iranian women in sports has been written from a critical feminist perspective, detailing the "oppressive" societal structures associated with sport in an Islamic Republic (Hargreaves, 2000; Pfister, 2003; Pfister, 2006). While understanding the structure in which Iranian women compete is important, it does not closely reflect my experiences with the way Iranian women define their own sport participation. The purpose of this autoethnography is (1) to confront my previously held stereotypes and reveal my personal transformation, (2) to provide a counternarrative that "extends sociological understanding" (Sparkes, 2002), (3) to demonstrate the use of sport in fostering cross-cultural respect, appreciation, and dialogue, and (4) to offer new ways of knowing and telling (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson, 2000b).

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Chapter 1: Introduction

This autoethnographic dissertation recounts previously untold stories about my journeys into the Islamic Republic of Iran as a sports consultant and women's softball coach for Global Sports Partners (GSP). In February 2000, I traveled to Iran after GSP accepted an invitation from Faezeh Hashemi, President of The Islamic Countries' Women's Sports Solidarity Council (ICWSSC). The purpose of the request was threefold: (1) to evaluate the level of athletes, coaches, referees, competitions, facilities, and physical education programs, (2) to explore strategies to improve girls' and women's sport participation in various clubs, schools, federations, and international competitions, and (3) to promote solidarity between Iranian and American sportswomen through friendly competitions and sports-related educational exchanges.

To be honest, I had serious doubts about achieving significant levels of success on all fronts. I was culturally informed *only* by my own ignorant stereotypes. My imagination was stifled by haunting images of black shrouds, faceless women, angry mobs, blindfolded Marines, burning American flags, and a lingering distrust of Iranians, who in *my* mind, were *all still* somehow responsible for the American hostage crisis thirty years earlier. My perceptions of Iranian women after the 1979 Islamic Revolution were filtered through a foreign observer's stereotypical lens of deeply embedded childhood memories and dominant media images (Stonebanks, 2008). I expected a backward approach to women's sports or more honestly, I pictured a token system completely void of any meaningful activity.

Since 2000, I have traveled to Iran nine times as the women's coordinator for GSP. In October 2001, I was one of four GSP representatives who attended *The Third Muslim Women's Games* as a goodwill ambassador. One year later, I returned to Tehran with a GSP women's basketball team to play in the *Solidarity Cup Friendship Tournament*. Our team, comprised of former National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) college players, became the first American women's team to compete in Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. In December 2002, I agreed to introduce women's fastpitch softball in three cities: Tehran, Isfahan, and Mashad, per the request and invitation of the Iran Softball Federation (ISF).¹ The following year, I presented a paper titled, "Sport and Religion: A Reciprocal Relationship," at the 2003 *International Council of Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance (ICHPERD) Middle-East Conference* held at the National Olympic Academy in Tehran. In 2005, I participated in *The Fourth Islamic Women's Games* as a coach and manager for Sarah Kureshi, an American-Muslim athlete. Kureshi was the first and only American-Muslim woman to compete in Iran since 1979. Two years later, the ISF and GSP organized Iran's first-ever international women's softball tournament. The *2007 Friendship Games* were held in Tehran's Azadi Sports Complex and included teams from Tehran (2), Mashad, Bushehr, and a GSP team made up of former high school and college players. In May 2008, on my most recent trip to Iran, I spent one-month training potential players and coaches for Iran's inaugural National Softball Team.

¹ The official name is: "Iran Baseball, Softball, Cricket, and Rugby Federation," but for the sake of specificity, I will use the "Iran Softball Federation (ISF)."

As a result of working with Iranian sportswomen over the past decade, I no longer think of the Islamic Republic as enemy territory (Stonebanks, 2008). Rather, I have learned about an amazing and historically rich Persian culture and have experienced the incomparable hospitality of the Iranian people. In ten years of collaborative work between the IFWS² and GSP, I have witnessed significant improvements and increased opportunities for Iranian sportswomen on all levels. The relationship between the IFWS and GSP continues to promote meaningful dialogue and solidarity between Iranian and American women through sports-related friendly competitions, sports development, and educational exchanges.

After my first visit to Iran in 2000, I returned home compelled to speak about my experiences with some of the kindest and bravest women I had ever met. In doing so, I appointed myself as an “ambassador for Iranian sportswomen.” While the title held no extrinsic value, it has served as a way for me to demonstrate my long-term commitment to their stories, as well as to honor their desire to be better understood by women around the world. The accumulation of my experiences in Iran have coincided with *and* led me to the most important educational moment of my life – my doctoral dissertation.

As the author of this autoethnography, I would like to invite you, the reader, to join me on a cross-cultural journey into my life as a sports consultant and softball coach in Iran since February 2000.

² In 1991, the Islamic Countries’ Women’s Sports Solidarity Council (ICWSSC) changed its name to the Islamic Federation of Women’s Sports (IFWS).

Purpose

The purpose for this autoethnography is deeply embedded within a series of life-changing personal experiences as a sports consultant and softball coach working with Iranian sportswomen since February 2000. To date, the majority of the literature devoted to Iranian women in sports has been written from a critical feminist perspective, detailing the “oppressive” societal structures associated with sport in an Islamic Republic (Hargreaves, 2000; Pfister, 2003; Pfister, 2006). Although Hargreaves (2000) and Pfister (2003) are pivotal pieces in the understanding of Iranian women’s sports, the focus of their research relies heavily upon structural policies and practices such as (a) gender segregation, (b) mandatory hijab, and (c) the objectification of the woman’s body. Understanding the structure in which Iranian women compete is important, but it does not closely reflect my experiences with the way Iranian women define their own sport participation.

In order to offer a counterstory (Nelson, 2001) to the dominant discourse about Iranian women’s’ sport participation, I submit this autoethnographic text to the reader as an invitation to join me on a cross-cultural journey that details the last decade of my life as a sports consultant and softball coach working with Iranian sportswomen. As a reader, please consider the political and cultural context in which this cross-cultural journey is situated – on the heels of the American Educational Amendment Title IX and the political movement of the Islamic Revolution. As you will soon learn, what seemed like politically disparate movements in terms of access and opportunities for female sport participation

have surprisingly yielded similar results, which is greater evidence of the need for counterstories (Nelson, 2001) in the discussion of human experience.

Prior to my first trip to Iran in 2000, my understanding of Iranian culture began with images of the 1979 Hostage Crisis, the burning of American flags, mysteriously veiled women, and angry mobs of men chanting “Death to America” in the street. I assumed that since 1979 not much had changed. However, I was exposed to the stories of a small group of Iranian sportswomen that challenged me to consider a shared humanity. “Our shared humanity...made understanding possible between us, it [was] the basis of our relationship together, and it is the relationship that is the heart of the matter” (Clark & Sharf, 2007, p. 400). Many of the Iranian sportswomen expressed a desire to tell us [Americans] about the details of their lives with the hope of being better understood by women around the world. They expressed frustration with being misrepresented or not represented at all – leaving them to feel marginalized, silenced, and misconceived (Ellis & Bochner, 2003). The purpose of this autoethnography is (1) to confront my previously held stereotypes and reveal my personal transformation, (2) to provide a counternarrative that “extends sociological understanding” (Sparkes, 2002), (3) to demonstrate the use of sport in fostering cross-cultural respect, appreciation, and dialogue, and (4) to offer new ways of knowing and telling (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson, 2000b).

Chapter 2: Autoethnography Defined

As defined by Denzin & Lincoln (2000), the “fourth moment” in the history of qualitative research denotes the Crisis of Legitimation, Representation, and Praxis – an era that caused many researchers to question the imperialism of research and the positionality of the researcher in the production of the text. The “fourth moment” established a distinct fissure in epistemological beliefs regarding researcher bias and subjectivity. This division in epistemic convictions sparked a new branch of qualitative inquiry, one that encouraged the insertion of the author into the text and pushed for new ways of knowing and telling (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Sparkes, 2002). Researchers began experimenting with alternative modes of expression, combining social science with art to create a more aesthetic emotional prose. As researchers continued to turn the ethnographic gazes upon themselves, a new form of introspective writing emerged: autoethnography.

Autoethnography as defined by Ellis & Bochner, is “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural...Autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethnos), and on self (auto)” (2000, pp. 739-740). In autoethnography, the author can no longer claim a detached or neutral position of authority; instead, the author’s voice is foregrounded, exposing the author’s “naked” thoughts and forcing the author to take responsibility for the way others are framed (Ellis, 2004). Autoethnographers, writing within a branch of narrative inquiry (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), believe in the power of story and that humans learn through stories lived and told

(Ellis, 2004). As the writer of an autoethnography, I must tell a story that invites the reader to feel my dilemmas, to think *with* my story rather than *about* it (Ellis, 2000). I must write in such a way that the reader can make personal connections to the stories and relate to the narratives emotionally, intellectually, morally, and aesthetically (Richardson, 1994). In order to create this two-way engagement with the reader, I must seek transparency and verisimilitude in my writing. As Richardson (2000b) stated, autoethnographies are:

Highly personalized, revealing texts in which authors tell stories about their own lived experiences, relating the personal to the cultural. The power of these narratives depends upon their rhetorical staging as “true stories,” stories about events that really happened to the writer. In telling the story, the writer calls upon fiction-writing techniques as dramatic recall, strong imagery, fleshed-out characters, unusual phrasings, puns, subtexts, allusions, the flashback, the flash-forward, tone shifts, synecdoche, dialogue, and interior monologue. (p. 11)

As the author of this text, I will heed Richardson’s advice and use fictional stylistic elements such as imagery, hypothetical situations, interior monologue, self-talk, reflection, present tense, past tense, and flashback to create a dynamic plotline that captivates the reader. It is my hope that the variance in my writing style will allow the reader to remain engaged and make connections that otherwise may not have been possible using other modes of expression.

Expectations: The Reader-Writer Relationship

Just as the writer of an autoethnography is no longer granted permission to “commentate” from the broadcaster’s booth, neither is the reader allowed to “spectate” from the bleachers. In autoethnography, the writer and the reader have responsibilities – both are expected to actively participate in constructing the meaning of the text. As the author, it is my duty to “capture the imagination of the reader and offer something meaningful about the world [I] have experienced” (Ellis, 2000). The stories I have recorded invite the reader into my life living alongside the first generation of Iranian women softball players and highlight my personal transformation from naïve American to “self-appointed” Ambassador. I have used the literature to contextualize my story, all while maintaining my voice by interweaving personal reflections and questions throughout the narrative, giving the appearance of a two-way conversation with the literature (Ellis, 2000).

The complexities of Iran are many; by including my personal reflections in conjunction with the current literature devoted to Iranian sportswomen I hope to offer a counternarrative, one that more accurately reflects *my experiences* in the country. I will resist the temptation to over-simplify, generalize, or over-theorize the sporting context for females in the Islamic Republic (Bochner, 2001). As Bochner suggested, autoethnographers must “think of the life being expressed not merely as data to be analyzed and categorized but as a story to be represented and engaged...we shouldn’t prematurely brush aside the particulars to get to the general” (p. 132). I am not claiming to speak on behalf of all Americans, women, or athletes who have ever traveled to the

Islamic Republic of Iran since 1979, nor am I declaring to speak on behalf of all Iranian sportswomen. Rather, I am maintaining that this autoethnographic research project is partial, local, and historically situated (Richardson, 2000b), and simply represents my interpretations of working in Iran as a sports consultant and softball coach since 2000.

Judgment: Safe or Out?

As a relatively new method of qualitative research, autoethnography is still considered to be, “located at the boundaries of disciplinary practices and raises questions as to what constitutes proper research” (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21). As a result, autoethnographies are often excluded from conversations of academic merit for charges of narcissism, solipsism, and lack of academic rigor (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). But the problem with these charges is not that they are wholly unfounded in some instances, but that autoethnographies are often judged using inappropriate criteria, making them “out” before they ever had a chance to be “safe” (Sparkes, 2002). Just as base runners in softball are judged by the umpire to be “safe” or “out,” autoethnographies are also judged in this way; however, if the umpire, in this instance, the reader, does not apply the correct rules to the game, then an accurate assessment of “safe” or “out” cannot be made. Therefore, as the writer of the text, it is important for me to provide a list of criteria in which you, as the reader, can “judge” the quality and worth of this autoethnography.

Sparkes (2002) offered “a number of criteria lists that have been put forward in recent years” and encouraged the author to consider “the context of the reading, as well as the purpose of the telling” when selecting criteria for judging different types of evocative writing (p. 207, 211). I believe Richardson’s (2000a) list of criteria most

closely reflect my purposes in writing this autoethnography; therefore, I propose that the following list of criteria be used as a guide in judging the quality of my work:

- *Substantive contribution*: Does this piece contribute to our *understanding* of social life? Does the writer demonstrate a deeply grounded (if embedded) social scientific perspective? How has this perspective informed the construction of the text?
- *Aesthetic merit*: Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Does the use of creative analytical practices open up the text, invite interpretive response? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfying, complex and not boring?
- *Reflexivity*: Is the author cognizant of the epistemology of postmodernism? How did the author come to write this text? How was the information gathered? Are there ethical issues? How has the author's subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgments about the point of view? Does the author hold him- or her-self accountable to the standards of knowing and telling of the people he or she has studied?
- *Impact*: Does this affect me? Emotionally? Intellectually? Does it generate new questions? Move me to write? Move me to try new research practices? Move me to action?
- *Expression of a reality*: Does this text embody a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived experience? Does it seem 'true' – a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the 'real?' (p. 937)

It is my hope that this autoethnography will not only demonstrate my personal transformation, but will challenge the reader to be moved by the text as well.

“Autoethnography *wants the reader to care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, to act*” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433, italics used for emphasis). As the reader bears witness to the author's account, he or she must also take responsibility in the acceptance or rejection of the stories (Hopper, Madill, Bratseth, Cameron, Coble, & Nimmon, 2008). As Tsang (2000) suggested,

These are also the readers' stories, for through reading, readers construct their own meanings and identify with or resist certain elements of the story. How they do so not only reflects back on them and their own values and notions of themselves, but also implicates them as collaborators in the creation of the meaning of the text. (p. 47)

As the author of this autoethnography, I have attempted to uphold my promises as the “narrator” of this story. It is my desire that as the reader of this text, you will also engage fully and be open to your own personal transformation.

Chapter 3: The Beginning

Ring....ring....ring....

“Hello.” *I roll over and squint to see what time it is. It’s 5:30am.*

“Sarah, this is Jenn from the training room. Coach told me to call you and tell you to come over to the complex.”

“Ok...is it my turn for a random drug test?”

“No, not a drug test.”

“Then what is it?”

“Coach said you have to weigh in for tonight’s game.”

“Is this a prank?”

“No.”

“Since when did we start weighing in at 5:30am on game days?”

“Uhhhh, I don’t know. I’m just doing what I was told.”

“This sucks! Who else is coming over? I’ll make sure they’re up and we’ll walk over together.”

“No one else is coming, Sarah....just you.”

“WHAT? This is crap! You can’t be serious...this is a prank, isn’t it?”

“Sarah, I’m sorry. It’s not my fault. I’m just doing my job. Can you please just come now so we can get this over with?”

I slammed the phone down, stumbled across my dorm room and reached into my dirty clothes pile next to my closet. I pulled out a set of gray and maroon team sweats, still damp from the post-practice, two-hour stationary-bike ride from the night before. I walked out into the bitter cold January air, pulled the hood of my sweatshirt over my head, and marched toward the athletic complex.

INTERIOR MONOLOGUE:

“I can’t believe this...”

“God, *what* are you trying to teach me?”

“Is this *really* happening to me?”

“I hate this place!”

“God, *why* me?”

“What do they have against me?”

“I can’t do this anymore!”

“I thought playing college basketball was supposed to be a great experience?”

“God, are you listening?”

“This absolutely sucks!!!!”

“I can’t keep working out an extra two hours *after* practice every night.”

“I don’t have the energy.”

“I’m gonna have to start taking more laxatives.”

“God, I know you have a plan for my life, so *why* is this happening to me?”

“I’ve never made myself throw up until now...”

“I HATE throwing up!”

“I feel like I’m losing control.”

“I’m scared...really, really scared.”

“GOD, *please help me*....I HATE throwing up!”

“GOD, *please help me*....I HATE throwing up!”

“GOD, *please help me*....I HATE throwing up!”

ENTER TRAINING ROOM:

“Hey Sarah, I’m really sorry about this. Take your shoes and socks off. You have shorts and a t-shirt on?”

“Yes.”

“Ok, go ahead and get your sweats off – when you’re ready, step on the scales.”

I fight back tears. I don’t want anyone to see me breaking. I clench my jaws, ready for Jenn to move the metal lever over inch-by-inch, over...a little more....back – wait... balanced.

“139”

“Ok, am I done?”

“Sarah, you’re two pounds over tonight’s listed game-weight. My chart shows you need to weigh no more than 137.”

“What?!?! That can’t be possible. My game weight was 139 for Monday’s game and today is just Thursday.”

“Says on your chart that you have to weigh 137 or less to be able to play tonight, I’m sorry.”

“That can’t be possible! I can’t lose two pounds in two days...and why, why is it important for me to lose two pounds since the last game? What, is 139 pounds “too fat” to play basketball? *Really?* What is the point if I’m playing well? Jenn, can you just write down 137? I will ride the bike in between classes, I won’t eat anything today...I promise, I’ll lose two more pounds before the game tonight. Please Jenn....I’m begging you. My parents are coming all the way from Kentucky to watch me play and I don’t know what else to do. This is so unfair!”

I can feel the tears clouding my vision...

“Sarah, I would love to help you, but I can’t. If I get caught, I’ll get in big trouble and I can’t take that chance. I don’t want to be involved in whatever is going on.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me!

This place is crap!

This is abuse –

Doesn’t anyone else see this???

Are you people blind?

You’ve got to be blind

or just too stupid to see what’s *really* going on here!!!!

Why do you even make us go to those stupid eating disorder workshops???
 They're pointless...
 Absolutely pointless!
 What else am I *supposed to do*?
 Tell me...what choice do I have?
 I don't have a choice...
 Either I throw up
 Take laxatives
 Workout extra
 OR
 I don't ever get a chance
 To play...
 To play...you know,
 The whole reason I signed a scholarship to come to this school!
 Tell me please,
 What choice do I have?
 I hope I die from this disease
 So every one of you has to live with knowing that

My blood is on your hands.

Maybe then, this won't happen to anyone else!
 Do you hear me?
 Can anyone hear me???
 What is wrong with you people?
 I hate this place!"

I put my sweats back on, walked straight to the gym, got on the stationary bike and rode until time to go to my 8:00am "Introduction to Sports Nutrition" class.

Searching for Answers

Prior to beginning my career as a college athlete, I had never taken a laxative, forced myself to throw-up, or over-exercised as a means to lose weight. In fact, before I attended college I was never told that I *needed* to lose weight. I was an athletic 5'5," eighteen year-old whose weight often fluctuated between 135 and 142 pounds. While I will never know the whole truth about why my "game weight" became such an issue, I

have speculated that coach's harmful and controlling actions pointed to much deeper issues between the two of us.

Coach and I shared very different belief systems and unfortunately our differences were never reconciled. My Christian faith and conservative upbringing seemed to cause a great deal of animosity between us. I can remember another early morning my freshman year when our graduate assistant coach called me and said, "Coach wants to see you right now. Drop whatever you're doing and get here." When I walked in, I knew she hadn't called to congratulate me on last night's game...for breaking the single-game record for three-pointers made...Nope, she was pissed off and it was written all over her face. She held up a yellow post-it note and violently waved it in the air.

Coach: *What is this? Who do you think you are?*

Sarah: *I don't know what you're talking about.*

Coach: *Don't lie to me you self-righteous.....*

Sarah: *Coach, really, I don't know what you're talking about.*

Coach: *Read this to me. Read it out loud.*

She handed me the yellow sticky note.

Sarah: *"If anyone is interested in starting a team Bible study, please see me and we'll get one started – Sarah."*

I had written this message on the dry-erase board in our team locker room the night before. I'm not sure how she ended up with my words written on the yellow post-it note...

Coach: *Who do you think you are? If you want to be an apostle do it on your own time, but don't try to bring religion onto this team... Not on my watch and not on my team. Do you understand me?*

Sarah: *Yes m'am.*

Coach: *And as of today, if I ever see you with another Christian t-shirt on underneath your practice jersey, you'll be running sprints until you are begging your "God" to save you from my wrath. Do I make myself clear?*

I didn't say a word. I couldn't think of a safe or appropriate response. I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

INTERIOR MONOLOGUE:

How can wearing a Christian t-shirt under my practice jersey cause so much anger? How can offering to organize a team Bible study be so offensive? It's not like I'm standing outside the locker room telling my teammates they're all going to hell ...I'm not beating anyone over the head with my Bible. I'm quiet about my beliefs and usually keep to myself. For God's sake, I'm never even around my teammates outside of practices and games... I'm always on a stationary bike, or sneaking away to throw up or running off to buy another box of laxatives. I can't believe this is happening to me.... Really? I can't believe it.

Coach: *I said...do I make myself clear?*

Sarah: *Yes m'am, but I don't understand what I'm doing wrong. I'm not trying to cause any trouble on our team and I'm not trying to disrespect anyone. I'm just trying to.....*

Coach stood up.
 Veins bulged out of her forehead.
 Her face turned dark red.
 She reached across her desk
 Grabbed the basketball-shaped paperweight
 And
 In one swift motion
 She threw it across the room in my direction.
 I ducked.
 It whizzed by my head
 And crashed into the wall behind me.
 She slammed her fists on her desk
 And yelled at the top of her lungs,

“DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?”

Sarah: *Yes m'am.*

I hated my life.

I felt alone.

I was afraid.

I was confused.

My coach hated me.

And I wanted to hate her too.

But I couldn't let myself go there.

I was taught to forgive.

To turn the other cheek.

And to pray for my "enemies."

So that's what I tried to do.

It wasn't easy.

She changed me.

Every time I stepped on the scales, I was reminded of her power.

Every time I sat down to eat, I was reminded of her control.

Notwithstanding our differences, I was the only freshman who earned an occasional position in the starting line-up. Furthermore, I set new three-point field goal records for our school and in our conference. I was also voted runner-up for Conference Freshman of the Year. Despite my struggles with food, weight, depression, isolation, and a very strained relationship with my coach, I found ways to move forward and cope with playing sports at the collegiate level. Unfortunately, my relationship with the coach

could not be reconciled. I had lost myself along the way. The only remedy for the situation was to leave.

After the fall semester of my sophomore year, I transferred from a land-grant university to a nearby faith-based NCAA Division-I university in hopes of rebuilding my collegiate basketball career *and* my life. The truth is very little changed and for the remainder of my athletic stint, I learned that being a student-athlete had *little* to do with the academic, social, and athletic development of young adults, but rather more to do with the success, wealth, and security of those in power. Even at a faith-based school, I continued to battle for control over my own body and health, only to be “released” from the team “in my best interest” for alleged physical health issues that “surfaced” during my senior year. These were my experiences.

After four years of my own hell on earth, I graduated Magna Cum Laude with a bachelor’s degree in Sports Administration. I will never forget the day I received my diploma.

My name was announced: “Sarah J. Hillyer.”

I was escorted up the platform stairs,
walked across the stage,
shook hands with the Chancellor,
fake smiled for the photo,
received a rolled up piece of paper wrapped in a blue ribbon,
was escorted down the platform stairs on the opposite side of the stage,
marched directly up the stadium bleachers
and headed straight for the exit.

I did not return to my assigned seat with my classmates; instead, I met my parents in the parking lot at the top of the arena. We drove to a local cafeteria for a quick “celebration dinner” and drove eight hours home to Kentucky.

Perhaps the *real* issues ran much deeper than what a certain number on the scales represented...or maybe not. I guess I'll never know the whole truth. Regardless, I am left with these memories and the process of writing them down has allowed me to interpret the events of my past and better understand my current journey.

Healing and Searching

I was angry.
I was bitter.
I was hurt.
I was scared.
I was tired.

I was determined.
I was hopeful.
I was supported.
I was loved.
I was ready to move forward.

I had faith.

Surrounded by a loving family and supportive friends, I spent the next year healing – physically, emotionally, and psychologically. I gained control over an eating disorder that consumed much of my collegiate career. I worked as a substitute teacher and high school softball coach. I prayed a lot. I asked difficult questions about my past and my future. I needed direction and turned to the God who never abandoned me during my darkest days. I trusted Him to direct my future and despite the anxiety that accompanied the prospect of beginning a brand new life, I experienced an unexplainable peace about the journey that awaited me. Even though I had always dreamed of becoming a successful college basketball coach, I no longer wanted anything to do with

“big-time” college athletics...in fact; I was still deciding if I wanted *anything* to do with sports *ever* again.

Questioning the Value of Sport

While contemplating different career choices, it became important for me to identify what I believed was so “good” about sports. I had just spent the last four years of my life playing sports at a “high-level;” and I devoted the same amount of time to earning a degree in a sports-related field. But why? Over time, I drafted a list of the reasons I “believed” in sports. Eventually, I identified several “benefits” and recorded them in my prayer journal:³

- I loved working with teammates to accomplish a common goal.
- I loved the friendships formed over the course of a season.
- I loved the opportunity to meet new people and see new places.
- I loved the excitement of learning something new.
- I loved experiencing personal and collective success.
- I loved learning valuable lessons as a result of losing or failures.
- I loved how sports brought our school and community together.
- Sports made me braver.
- Sports made me stronger
- Sports made me smarter.
- Sports made me more confident.
- Sports made me a better person.
- I loved applying the discipline, goal setting, teamwork, and commitment in sports to real-life circumstances.

Yes...that’s why I loved sports.

³ My prayer journal was a small wire-bound book that I received as a graduation gift.

Every page included a Bible verse and a space to record my prayers.

Global Sports Partners

In May 1994, exactly one year after I graduated and moved home, I was invited by a friend of my parents to travel to China on a “Friendship Basketball Tour” sponsored by Global Sports Partners (GSP). The decision to join the goodwill team was not a difficult one to make. I was ready to use my athletic abilities again, but this time for something more meaningful than breaking records or winning conference championships. It was time for me to take ownership of my sporting experiences and this goodwill tour provided an opportunity for me to replace negative memories with positive actions of service. The act of remembering and recording my own list of potential “benefits” to sports participation allowed me to see beyond my recent and negative experiences. It also helped me to understand the power of sport and its ability to reach others in meaningful ways. In the process, I realized that it was never about the *sport* itself, but rather about the intentionality of the sport participants.

In 1994, I chose to join GSP’s first-ever women’s basketball team and to use sport in China as a way to build friendships between American and Chinese athletes, to promote women’s basketball in China, and to raise money through exhibition matches for local Chinese charities.

Traveling to China

My entire life changed after only two weeks in China. During the two-week “Friendship Basketball Tour,” I witnessed countless acts of kindness, selflessness, and sincerity toward others. I worked with coaches, players, and sports administrators who

cared deeply about other people. I experienced the power of an organization's *intentional* use of sports as a means to create positive and meaningful cross-cultural experiences. I looked into the eyes of Chinese athletes and somehow related to them in ways I never imagined possible. I connected to them, to their stories, and to their lives as athletes "owned by the state."⁴ I genuinely understood *some* of their pain and hardships. I found a part of myself in each of their stories; I heard many of their voices in my own painful recollections of being a collegiate athlete "owned" by two different institutions of higher education in the name of NCAA college athletics.

About Global Sports Partners

Steve DeVoss founded GSP in 1992. Prior to launching the non-profit organization, Steve played baseball at Murray State University, served as a scout for the Atlanta Braves, and developed various recreational programs for youth across several states. I found Steve to be a man with extraordinary vision and a remarkable faith. I was not only lucky enough to meet Steve; I was fortunate enough to spend two weeks with him during our women's basketball tour of China. I wanted to know everything about his vision for GSP, and ultimately I wanted to know if God was using Steve's organization as an answer to my prayers. The following account is a composite of several conversations

⁴ "Owned by the state" is an expression used by several Chinese athletes and coaches who have become dear friends over the past fifteen years. For an excellent source on the structure and history of women's sports in China, please refer to Jinxia Dong's (2003)

Women, sport, society in modern China: Holding up more than half the sky.

that took place in buses, trains, planes, and taxis as we traveled for two weeks throughout several Chinese cities:

Sarah: Steve, I'd love to know more about GSP. How did you come up with the idea?

Steve: Well at the most basic level, I enjoy sports and I love people. At a more philosophical level, and often times disputed level I believe in the ability of sports, if used intentionally, to build community and cooperation among cultures. I also believe that sport is a powerful agent in developing respect and cross-cultural appreciation, which can lead to social reconstruction, community development, and peace.

Sarah: Amazing! Ok, what else? Keep talking....

We both smiled...

Steve: What else would you like to know?

Sarah: What are your long-term, big picture goals for GSP?

Steve: Ultimately, I want GSP to impact people by promoting global goodwill, the worth of the individual, community development, and mutual understanding among cultures.

Sarah: How? That sounds great, but it also sounds a bit overwhelming and honestly, a little unrealistic!

Steve: Yeah, it is a God-sized dream, no doubt, but why not dream as big as you can and see what happens? I see us achieving this through the use of professional activities that include sports exchange, sports development, sports expert placement, and consultation services. The reason I believe these are key to the success of our goals is because these activities promote sports participation and proficiency, personal health, and valuable lessons learned from the exercise of discipline, teamwork, achievement, and even defeat.

His words rang a bell... "discipline, teamwork, achievement, even defeat"... Then I remembered my list...

- I loved working with teammates to accomplish a common goal.
- I loved the friendships formed over the course of a season.
- I loved the opportunity to meet new people and see new places.
- I loved the excitement of learning something new.
- I loved experiencing personal and collective success.

- I loved learning valuable lessons as a result of losing or failures.
- I loved how sports brought our school and community together.
- Sports made me braver.
- Sports made me stronger.
- Sports made me smarter.
- Sports made me more confident.
- Sports made me a better person.
- I loved applying the discipline, goal setting, teamwork, and commitment to real-life circumstances.

Steve continued: These are worthy pursuits, but are not the extent of our end-goals. We want to add value to each sports initiative by utilizing our resources and relationships to contribute to the advancement of understanding and cooperation.

Sarah: Ok, sorry for my ignorance, but what do you mean exactly when you use the terms “sports exchange,” “sports development,” “sports expert placement,” and “consultation services?” I think I understand “sports exchanges,” – I’m assuming you mean like our team here in China and the second component would be the possibility of a Chinese team traveling to the United States?

Steve: Yes, you’re right on with sports exchanges, but let me add something that is a really important component of our “sports exchange” philosophy, which follows proven principles related to international travel, cultural exchange and social engagement through sports activities. Like this trip to China, your team has been “contracted” by GSP to serve as “Ambassadors for Peace.” Our goal is to use this approach and to send “Ambassadors for Peace” to troubled, needy, and/or developing areas of the world, *per the request of the respective countries*. What’s really important is that we don’t represent any government, political, or religious ideology; instead, we reach out in the name of sportsmanship and fair play. The sports groups, like this one, may represent different countries, but will never be representatives of their governments. Through this approach, there is no threat to anyone or any system when we come in the name of sports.

Sarah: Interesting. I bet you get that question a lot...the one about government affiliations?

Steve: Yes, we do, so it’s always important that we make our “political independence” very clear. It is an important component of GSP’s ethos. Let me move on to the next part of your question: As far as “sports development,” we seek to realize two primary objectives:

- Increase participation in sports. The emphasis is on recreation, enjoyment, exercise, and health. I believe sports can be enjoyed by all ages and walks of life. We coordinate and contribute to programs like Sport For All and other initiatives

to involve novices and enthusiasts in the enjoyment and benefit of sport. We are also committed to provide meaningful sports experiences for the disabled and the aged.

- Increase the competitive level of sports. We work with Olympic committees, federations, clubs, and schools, and we place an emphasis on improving the quality and raising the level of sports proficiency. I believe that broad-based community participation increases the popularity of certain sports and creates a larger pool of skilled individuals. Another really important point for us is that GSP does not sign the brightest prospects from a country to export their talents; rather, we work in cooperation with federations and within the existing structures to improve the level of sports for each country where we operate.

Sarah: Strong objectives and I can really appreciate your commitment to keeping local talent in the home country. I don't think that happens much in our increasingly globalized world.

Steve: It's a cornerstone for GSP. We hope that our commitment to this principle will continue to set us apart from a growing number of "sports development" companies and agencies. As far as "sports placement" and "sports consultation," there is some overlap when I use these terms.

Sarah: Ok, great...just keep talking. This is really fascinating to me!

Steve: Remember when I said earlier that I believe sport is a powerful agent in developing respect and cross-cultural understanding? Let me expand some more on that idea. I believe sport has the ability to serve as a bridge between cultures, as well as the ability to bring those cultures together. Sports have, at times, been an effective means of engendering goodwill, mutual understanding and respect. I believe that by coming together, intentionally, and on the common ground of sports, where the rules and definitions are the same in every culture, we find a basis for building relationships, moving from shared commonality to an appreciation for differences. By organizing purposeful sports initiatives, we can hopefully contribute to international understanding and cooperation. We also want to provide a forum conducive to addressing important global issues and promoting the preservation of heritage.

Sarah: I think this friendship tour of China is evidence...but do you think some will say this is a naive conviction?

Steve: Certainly.... But think about it – how many major movements in human history started with one person or a small group of people doing their part to create change? We can't disregard these human accounts, nor can we, for example, discount the ways *we* are being changed on this short cultural trip to China. I

don't claim to speak for all of the Chinese athletes we have interacted with, but what have you heard them saying, what things have you all discussed, how have your views of each other changed? *Even if* the numbers of people seem insignificant, history tells us that it only takes a small group of people at a time to bring about significant social changes.

Sarah: Absolutely! It's inspiring to think about. Steve, I understand this is the first international cultural exchange for GSP that includes a women's team. I'm curious, what is your vision specifically for the future of girls and women's projects for GSP?

Steve: I'm glad you asked. This is something that I've been thinking a lot about lately and I couldn't be happier that we have included our first women's team on this tour of China. I have a special place in my heart for girl's and women's sports, maybe because I have three beautiful, strong, and independent women in my life. There is Pam my wife and my two daughters, Stephanie and Emily.

My goal is to provide opportunities for women to enjoy the experiences of discipline, teamwork, and victory, which are wholesome and beneficial parts of sports involvement. Sports have historically been a vital catalyst in the pursuit of self-actualization—ultimate fulfillment and personhood and unfortunately, in many societies, women are suppressed and basic rights are withheld. While we won't seek to interfere in the structure of such societies, we will promote sports as an avenue for women in such situations to find self-expression and relief from the pressures of daily life.

Sarah: I love it! I have to tell you how much I appreciate your time and sharing your vision with me. It's weird, I feel like I have known you my whole life. My heartbeat for the world and for sports has been perfectly expressed through your ability to articulate what I have felt for so long, but never knew how to say.

After college, I think I gave up on sports for the most part. I chose to believe that my negative experiences as a college athlete limited my ability to succeed, much less enjoy, working in any sports-related field. Honestly Steve, I feel like my whole perspective on life has changed and my prayers have been answered. I have asked God for direction for my life and maybe this is what He has been preparing me for all along. Without my experiences in college, I would have never been able to relate so personally to the Chinese athletes we met on this trip. But because I could identify with them on a more intimate level, I was able to offer them encouragement. I can be honest when I say, I grew to genuinely care for them.

Steve: Now, can I tell you something?

Sarah: Of course...

Steve: We, I mean my wife Pam and the GSP board of directors, have been hoping to find someone to create and lead a GSP women's "department." Requests for women's initiatives continue to grow daily. We are interested in identifying a woman with the vision and the competence to move quickly toward developing a women's focus. Maybe this goes without saying, but we are looking for a woman who shares our vision and passion...someone who embraces the potential for a more peaceful world, through the intentional use of sports, especially for women. Maybe this trip was the answer to both of our prayers?

I began working closely with GSP in 1994 after we returned home from China. Over the next few years, we carried out thirteen more sport-related projects for women in China; and since 1999, our work has expanded to Inner Mongolia, Turkey, Israel, Jordan, Tunisia, Morocco, Iraq, and Iran.

Beyond East Asia

In 1998, Steve attended the Asian Games in Bangkok, Thailand, to continue promoting the aims of GSP in the region. As a result, requests for new partnerships and affiliations increased and the scope of GSP's outreach rapidly expanded from the Far East across North Africa and deep into the heart of the Middle East.⁵

⁵ GSP has coordinated successful projects in more than 20 countries and maintains friendly relations with: Afghanistan, Brazil, Cambodia, China, France, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Iran, Israel, Jordan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Malaysia, Mongolia, Morocco, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Korea, Sudan, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, USA, Venezuela, and Vietnam.

Three months after Steve attended the Asian Games, the Secretary General of the Iran National Olympic Committee (IRI-NOC) invited him to Tehran. The purpose of the invitation was to explore ways GSP and the IRI-NOC, in coordination with several Iranian sports federations, could cooperate in the future. The Iran Basketball Federation submitted the first proposal just three weeks after Steve departed Tehran. They requested a GSP-sponsored men's basketball team to compete in the *Sport and Nations International Basketball Tournament*

GSP accepted the invitation and took a team of current and former NCAA players to Iran. The International Basketball Tournament was held in Tehran at the Azadi Sports Complex in August 1999 and included teams from Russia, Yugoslavia, Saudi Arabia, and the United States of America (GSP team). The theme for the Iranian-sponsored tournament was: *Dialogue Among Nations*. The presence of the GSP team in the Sport and Nations International Basketball Tournament served as a testament to GSP's and the IRI-NOC's commitment to engendering goodwill, mutual understanding, and respect through cross-cultural sports initiatives. As a result, the IRI-NOC and GSP agreed to continue a meaningful and long-term working relationship through various sports initiatives.

The Question of Iran

Ring...ring...ring

Sarah: Hello.

Steve: Sarah, this is Steve DeVoss. How are you doing?

Sarah: I'm good, Steve, how are you?

Steve: Great... we've been flooded with new requests. After evaluating each of them we are now directing our attention toward identifying the right personnel match for each project. It's all good stuff, but we are having a hard time keeping up with the overwhelming workload.

Sarah: Well, I guess as long as we stay busy, we know good things are happening...

Steve: Exactly.

Sarah: Hey, how was your trip to Iran with the men's basketball team?

Steve: It was fantastic! We had a lot of great meetings with several important figures in the Iran – NOC and different sports federations. We were treated with impeccable hospitality and by keeping our promise to participate in the basketball tournament we earned the trust of the Olympic Committee leadership and other sports-related organizations. By the time we left Tehran, they were confident in our commitment to future sports projects in Iran.

Sarah: Steve, that's awesome! I prayed a lot for you guys while you were gone, so it's good to hear things went so well.

Steve: Thank you, Sarah.... And speaking of Iran, I have a question for you about your schedule in February. Are you busy?

Sarah: No, actually February looks pretty flexible this year. What do you have in mind?

Steve: I received a fax today from the Islamic Countries' Women Sports Solidarity Council (ICWSSC). The president of the organization is Faezaeh Hashemi...you may have heard of her father? He was the president of Iran from 1989-1997; Rafsanjani is his name. Anyway, she has requested a small delegation of sports administrators, coaches, and former athletes to come to Tehran for two weeks. I wanted to call you to check on your availability and your willingness to represent GSP on this exploratory project for women's sports in Iran. If you can go, I have three other women in mind that would round out a strong team to meet Mrs. Hashemi's requests.

Sarah: Steve, are you serious? Wow...I don't even know what to say...

THOUGHTS:

It was one thing to pray for Steve while he was in Iran with the men's basketball team; it was a totally different consideration when the prospect of going to Iran became *personal*.

FLASHBACK:

November 4, 1979 – I was only eight years in old 1979, but vivid images of burning American flags, death to America signs, and frightening media reports of the 444-day hostage crisis flooded my mind.

SELF-TALK:

Is the Iran of the year 2000 the same as the Iran of 1979 – it can't be...but it must be, it looks like it on television, it sounds like it on the news....I've never seen, heard, or read anything different – it must be – it's *still* a scary place....

Sarah: Steve, I *think* I would love to go based on *your* recent experiences in the country; but I also think I need to talk to my family before I give you my final answer. I can just hear my mom now – “You’re going where? Sarah, don’t you remember when we watched that movie, *Not Without My Daughter*?”⁶

Steve and I both chuckled.

Sarah: Steve, let me talk to my parents and I’ll give you a final answer soon.

Steve: Absolutely, Sarah. I completely understand and I’ll look forward to your response. If your parents have any questions about my recent trips to Iran, I will be happy to answer them. I can tell you with absolute honesty and conviction that I would not hesitate for even one moment to send my own two daughters to Iran, if their strengths fit this particular project. The Iranian people have been wonderful to me and our teams have been treated with respect and appreciation.

Sarah: Thanks Steve. I’ll get back to you as soon as possible.

⁶ *Not Without My Daughter* was a film released in 1991 about an American citizen who visited the Islamic Republic with her Iranian husband and their young daughter. The husband promised they would be safe and return to the United States after visiting his family for a short time; however, he changed his mind and decided that Iran was a better place than America for his family.

Chapter 4: The Journey Begins

Intercom: Iran Air flight number 1529 to Tehran will be boarding in fifteen minutes. Please have your passport and boarding pass ready and available for our gate agents...

Sarah (on pay-phone from Dubai): Mom, they just made an announcement...we're boarding in fifteen minutes.

Mom: I'm so excited for you, Sarah! Are you nervous at all? Do you have everything...Passport? Money? Scarf? Body suit...what do they call those things – burkas?

Sarah: No, no, the burkas are the blue ones in Afghanistan, remember that documentary we watched...I think it was on PBS? I think the long overcoat thingies we have to wear in Iran are called "manteaux" and the scarf to cover our heads is called "hijab."

Mom: So, are the manteaux same as the black cape-looking things?

Sarah: I don't think so...I think the black cape is called the "chador" and the word literally means "tent." But it's all sort of confusing because I think there are even more types of coverings too. All I know is that Steve told us to make sure we have a scarf big enough to completely cover all of our hair, a long jacket to cover our wrists and below our knees, and to pack them in our carry-on luggage because we will need to put them on as soon as we land in Tehran.

Mom: So, you're sure you have everything you need?

Sarah: Yep, believe it or not, I remembered everything. Well, I better get off here and find the others. I love you, mom. I'll call you as soon as I have the chance – I have no idea if we'll have access to phones or not.

Mom: I love you too, honey. Be safe and we'll look forward to hearing from you. Did you get to call grandma and grandpa?

Sarah: Yeah, I talked to them before I called you. Ok, gotta go...love you bunches. Bye.

Mom: Bye-bye sweetie...Oh, don't forget to read the letter I sent with you....talk to you soon.

I catch up with the other three volunteers and we stand in a long line of people who are also waiting to board the 1:30am flight bound for Tehran.

INTERIOR MONOLOGUE:

Interesting...not many women
weird,
none of them are "covered" either...
But they look Iranian...
don't all Iranian women have to cover themselves?
Don't stereotype Sarah,
they could be from anywhere.
Or just visitors, like us

Why is everyone staring at us?

Oh, I don't know,
maybe because

We are the only AMERICANS
We are the only WHITE women
We are the only ones with real BLONDE HAIR
We are the only ones with natural BLUE EYES
We are the only ones dressed like ATHLETES

I *really* can't believe
I am about to be
in
the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Iran Air employee: Excuse me m'am, your boarding pass please?

Sarah: Oh, I'm sorry, of course.

I hand her my boarding pass, walk through the sliding door, and get on the shuttle bus that takes us to our airplane.

Seat 21A

SELF-TALK:

Good, I have a window seat, maybe I can get some sleep...landing at 3:30 in the morning is going to make for a long day tomorrow...today. Hopefully, we will have a day to rest and adjust to the time change....

Oh, I should read the letter from mom and dad before I try to fall asleep...
Sarah,

By now, you are probably well on your way to Tehran. I wanted to let you know how proud your dad and I are of you! I also wanted to tell you how I felt, as your mother, when you first asked me about going to Iran. Initially, I was scared - really, really scared and I didn't like the thought of you being somewhere so dangerous and so far away! All I could think about was that movie we watched about the American woman and her daughter who weren't allowed to leave Iran. I kept imagining that you might not ever come home to us.

But Sarah, I knew in my heart, that my own fears should not interfere with the plans God has for you. So I decided to pray...and I've been praying a lot since you told your dad and I about the trip. I asked God to give me peace about you going and HE HAS ANSWERED MY PRAYERS! I am at total peace, even though it has not been easy at times.

Last week a patient came into the office - you played softball with one of her daughters in high school...she was a couple years younger than you. Anyway, Jane asked how you were doing and what you were up to these days. I told her that I couldn't be prouder of you, that you were coaching college softball and getting ready to go to Iran for ten days to work with women's sports programs.

I really wasn't prepared for what came next! She yelled at me, in front of everyone sitting in our waiting room, "What kind of mother are you? How could you, in your right mind, let Sarah go to a place like Iran? Did you forget what happened twenty-years ago? Don't you ever watch the news - see those bearded men and women in black capes with their fists pumping in the air chanting, "Death to America?" Foreigners go missing and no one ever hears from them again. If Sarah disappears, you'll never be able to find her! Could you live with yourself? Could you ever sleep again? Those people are crazy.

At first, I didn't know how to respond. I felt defensive and even doubted myself. Were her accusations about me true? Was I not being a good mother? Did other mothers think the same things about me? I've told so many other friends and patients. How would other moms handle this situation? Before I let myself go down that road any further, God reminded me of His Word, His promises, and His faithfulness... That's when I asked Jane if I could tell her a story. She agreed to sit down and have a cup of coffee. I think you need to hear this story too, Sarah.

"Jane, I am at total peace about Sarah going to Iran. I have spent a lot of time praying about this and God has given me a peace that passes all understanding. Let me tell you why...you see, when Sarah was 14 months old, Doc and I left her with a baby-sitter so we could go on a date for our anniversary. It was the first time we had left her with a sitter, so naturally, as first-time parents, we were a little nervous - we even felt a little guilty. But we went anyway and enjoyed some alone time together. When we came home, the sitter said she did really well and fell asleep in her crib about an hour earlier. Doc took the baby-sitter home and I started to get ready for bed.

Then, I heard the most God-awful, blood-curling cry and immediately knew that something was terribly wrong. I had never heard Sarah cry like that before. By the time I got upstairs to her room, she was already turning purple, her eyes were rolled back into her head and she was gasping for air. I didn't know what to do so I just held her close until her dad got home. I met him at the front door, "Michael, something is wrong with Sarah, help her, please, help her! You have to do something..." He grabbed her out of my arms, put her in the car, and headed for the nearest hospital, 45 minutes away. I stayed at home because I was almost full-term with our second child and our doctor on call was at a different hospital over an hour away in the opposite direction. I was absolutely hysterical!!! I fell on my face in our living room floor and screamed out to God:

God, I don't know if you are real and I don't know if you care or if you are even listening to me, but if you really are who you say you are, please save Sarah's life. I don't think you bargain with people, but I am begging you, if you save her and bring her home to me, *I will give her to you.* Please, God, I am pleading with you to save my daughter's life. I want to believe in you and I want to know that you are a personal God. If you answer my prayer, I promise you, she will be yours to serve you as long as we are on this earth.

The next two hours were the longest of my life. A little after ten o'clock, Michael called and said, "Sarah is going to be just fine. They want to run a few more tests but we should be home in a couple hours."

When Doc brought Sarah home, I held her in my arms until morning. I thanked God for answering my prayers and promised Him that I would uphold my end of the bargain, no matter

what the cost. The next morning, I told Michael about my "conversation" with God, even though I was really afraid of how he might react. He listened quietly and agreed to begin a serious quest for spiritual truths. Our lives have never been the same since that night.

So Jane, while it may not seem logical to you, it makes perfect sense to me. God answered my prayers when I called out to Him, even before I believed in Him. He has been faithful to our family for all these years. My responsibility on this earth as Sarah's mother is to love her, support her, encourage her, and pray for her. The truth is Jane, Sarah belongs to God. Michael and I were just the lucky ones He selected to care for her while we live out our short lives here on this earth. She is a gift to us from God, *on loan*, and as much as we love her, we know that our capacity to love pales in comparison to how much the God of this world loves her. This is why I feel at peace about Sarah going to Iran."

Sarah, I hope you know how much your dad and I love you. You were God's gift to us, twice, and you have taught us so many things about living a life of faith! Please know that we are praying for you every day, whether you are in Iran, or in the loving arms of your family. We love you, Sarah.

Mom and Dad

Intercom: This is your pilot. At this time, all women please adhere to the proper Islamic attire of the Islamic Republic of Iran. We will be landing in Tehran in approximately 45 minutes.

Sarah: Gina, what did he just say?

Gina: I don't know. I was asleep.

Sarah: What's all the commotion? Why are those women putting on their veils? It doesn't look like we are getting ready to land anytime soon...

Flight Attendant: Excuse me Miss, please, it is time for you to put on hijab.

Gina: Yes m'am, but we thought we didn't have to veil until we landed.

Flight Attendant (smiling): I am sorry, but if you fly with Iran Air, you must put on hijab once we enter the airspace of the Islamic Republic. If you fly with a different

airline from another country, then you can wait until you land at the Mehrabad Airport.

Sarah: Oh, ok, thank you...Gina, can you get my backpack down?

Gina: Sure will, my scarf and jacket are up there too.

Sarah: Thanks.

We both wrestle the long coats and scarves out of our bags.

Sarah (laughing): We should have practiced putting these things on before we got on the plane!

Gina: No kidding – I have no idea what I'm doing. I feel like Aunt Jemima...do I look like her?

Sarah: Yeah, exactly like her, except for your white skin, blond hair, and blue eyes...and maybe because you weigh about 115 pounds...but other than that, you look *just* like her!

Gina: How do I look? Is all my hair covered up? How about in the back?

Sarah: Looks good...yeah, all your hair is covered. I gotta be honest though... you look hilarious!

Gina: Oh, and you don't?

Sarah: I can only imagine how funny we are all going to look when we get off the plane and meet our hosts. I mean look at us...we look like we are wearing towel head-wraps and bathrobes! We were lucky to find anything that resembled hijab at all...

Gina: Can I be serious for a second?

Sarah: Sure.

Gina: Are you scared? Even a little bit?

Sarah: I don't know if you call it scared...well, I guess it's the same thing – If you mean, "Am I afraid of the unknown?" CERTAINLY! I have been trying so hard to picture what everything will be like...you know how you envision yourself in places walking around, or talking to people, or eating, or sleeping...no matter how hard I try, I can't even remotely imagine what the streets will look like, what

the food will taste like, what the people will act like...I don't know if the people will hate us simply because we are Americans? I don't think the sports people will act like they hate us because Steve said they have treated him really well, but as far as ordinary Iranians who just see us on the streets; I have no idea what to expect. The only knowledge I have of Iran stems from childhood memories, like watching the nightly news on a black and white television about the hostage crisis. I remember mobs of men and women with their fists pumping while they chanted "Death to America, Death to the Great Satan." I remember watching them hang effigies of our president and mobs of mad-looking people burning American flags.

Gina: Yeah, I don't really know anything about Iran either. I never really hear about it except for every once in a while on the news, but it's always about some nuclear something or economic sanction or terror accusations...but I certainly never hear anything about the ordinary, everyday people of Iran. So, I guess I feel like we're walking into the abyss of the great unknown.

Intercom: Ladies and Gentleman please fasten your seatbelts and return your tray tables and seatbacks to the upright position. We are making our final descent into Tehran's Mehrabad Airport. The local time in Tehran is 3:35am.

Sarah: Well Gina, I guess we're about to find out! It's game-time!

We exited the plane and blindly followed the other passengers through dimly lit corridors that eventually led us into a large and open space. The crowd quickly dispersed and positioned themselves in different "lines" extending from several passport control booths. The four of us stood close together, but none of us said anything. As we inched closer and closer to the meticulously bearded man behind the Plexiglas window, the faster and faster my heart pounded. By the time I approached the front of the line...

INTERIOR MONOLOGUE:

I feel like I'm going to pass out!

Why am I so nervous?

Why is my heart beating so fast?

What am I so afraid of?

Everything is going to be ok, Sarah.

Don't let the others see you like this...they need you to be strong.

Just calm down...it's not like we just showed up here on our own – no, we were *invited* by the IFWS. The Iran National Olympic Committee co-sponsored our visas. Everything is going to be fine. Take a deep breath. Count to ten slowly. Wait, why am I counting in Spanish? They don't speak Spanish in Iran...

But what if I don't make it through passport control? What if they look at my American passport and take me into some dark room with a single light bulb hanging from a string? What if I they question me...interrogate me...what if they don't believe why I am here? What if they do the same thing to Gina, Rachel or Jan? What if we get separated from each other? I can't even understand one word anyone is saying...I can't even remember what language they speak? Arabic? No, no...it's something else. Starts with an "F." What if the guard asks me questions and I can't understand him? What then?

I *really* don't like feeling this vulnerable. I am at the complete mercy of people who hate me...

*Pull it together, Sarah! No one hates you.
How do you know they don't hate you?
This is crazy....*

Everything is going to be fine.
Smile.
Just smile.

NO you idiot, DO NOT smile!

Remember, you don't

smile at a man

make eye contact with a man

extend your hand to greet a man

That's all you need...

“This is a *FOX NEWS SPECIAL ALERT*...American woman visiting Iran as a sports coach was arrested late last night for alleged prostitution. Local police are mounting evidence...on surveillance cameras she was seen smiling and making eye contact with a male passport control agent.”

But, if I don't smile or make eye contact, how will they know that I'm a “good American, a nice American?”

Ohhhh, this is *so* confusing.
 No smiling at strangers – especially men...they will think you are sexually aggressive –
but...
 I always smile at people
 Otherwise I'm considered rude
 I always make good eye contact
 Otherwise I'm considered rude
 I always extend my hand
 Otherwise I'm considered rude
 this is *SO* against everything I've been taught...

Ok Sarah,
 just hand the man your passport
 keep your eyes down
 and
 don't smile.
 You just need to make it through to the other side of the booth....

Bzzzzzzzzzz

I flinch.
 The noise scares me.
 It's just the buzzer to the passport control gate.
 It's my turn.
 Oh my gosh, it's my turn. Help me, please.
 I push the little gate open
 step up to the counter
 and slip my passport under the small opening at the base of the window
 Keep looking down, Sarah
 Don't smile
 Stay focused
Look innocent

The bearded man in a green military-style, officer uniform grabbed my passport, turned through the pages, and then held my photo page up to the window.

He examined my face,
 I kept my eyes down
 then he looked back at my passport photo,
 back to my face,
 I kept my eyes down
 back to my passport photo,
 back to my face,
 I kept my eyes down

back to my passport photo

He took a deep breath, readjusted himself in his chair, and swiped my passport through a machine hooked to his computer. After banging on his computer keyboard....

He held up my passport again
examined my face,
I kept my eyes down
and he looked back to my passport photo

INTERIOR MONOLOGUE:

What is he doing?
Do my new blond highlights really make my hair look *that* much different?
Really? Have I changed *that* much since my passport photo was taken?
It wasn't that long ago...

BREAK IN MONOLOGUE:

I glanced back at the others standing in line and shrugged my shoulders – it was my way of saying, “I don't know what's taking him so long.” When my eyes met Gina's, I just couldn't get over how different she looked...she looked like an old bag lady in a silk scarf and oversized silk bathrobe.

INTERIOR MONOLOGUE:

Oh my gosh...*that's* what's taking him so long! No wonder I don't look the same as I do in my passport photo! Wow...

“Bebakhshid.”

Did he just say something? Was he talking to me?
I turn back around and face the Plexiglas window...

“Bebakhshid.”

Sarah, leaning forward but looking away: “I'm sorry, I don't understand...”

Passport agent in English: “Excuse me, Miss Sarah Hillyer from Uh-mreek-a, welcome to EE-Ron.”

He nods his head, slips my passport back through the hole, and points to the baggage claim area at the top of the escalators behind him.

YES! I MADE IT...

WE ALL MADE IT!

Recording my Experiences

Journal Entry 1 – February 16, 2000⁷

- I can't believe I'm really here!!!! Somebody pinch me, please!!!! So far, everyone seems *really, really* nice. After successfully making it through passport control and riding up the escalator to baggage claim, four ladies dressed in black chadors (in Farsi, literal meaning is tent) greeted each of us with a bouquet of flowers and a kiss on both cheeks. Funny, the women said the same thing as the man at passport control – “Welcome to “EE-Ron.” At first, I didn't understand them, but now I get it... I've been saying “I-Ran” my whole life. I always thought it was pronounced like it looks, “I-Ran,” and that's how everyone pronounces it where I'm from. Ok, I'll have to work on a new pronunciation...this Farsi language thing is going to be pretty easy for me...I think!
- Roya and Neda will be our translators for the week. They both seem soooooo sweet! I think they're both in their twenties? Neda looks like the younger of the two. The ladies from the Physical Education Organization did not speak any English and they looked to be in their 30s or 40s. It was hard to tell – maybe because they were exhausted after waiting for us at the airport since midnight? The P.E. ladies didn't come to the hotel with us. Roya said we would see both of them at our first meeting today...which starts in 2 hours! Guess we're not going to get any rest or a chance to adjust to the time difference. In “EE-Ron,” we are 8.5 hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time at home. The half hour added on to the time difference really confuses me...I wonder if any other country is like this?
- We ate flatbread, hard-boiled eggs, really thick yogurt (I think it was really sour cream), green olives, and goat cheese for breakfast. The restaurant is on the main floor of the Olympic Academy Hotel and all the servers and cooks were men – I didn't see any women.
- I'm waiting on Gina to get out of the shower. After I get ready, we'll meet the driver and our translators downstairs and go to our first meeting. Roya said we have several meetings today, but that we will get to see some competitions while we are here. I think she said basketball, swimming, volleyball, and maybe karate?

⁷ All journal entries are re-constructed from my original notes and travel journals while traveling in Iran.

I can't wait! I still can't wrap my head around what they will *look* like...what will their bodies look like? Are they weak and frail? Soft and fatty? Lean and muscular? I have my assumptions but I have no basis for what I picture in my mind. Are they athletic or are their movements forced and awkward? I'm just gonna be honest and throw it out there– I simply can't *picture* Iranian women as *athletes*...I just cannot *see* it.

Journal Entry 2 – February 17, 2000

- Yesterday had to be the longest day of my life – maybe because we had been traveling for over 2 days (Nashville to Frankfurt to Dubai to Tehran) and never went to bed after we got to our hotel at 6am??? We left our rooms at 8am and got to our first meeting at 9am (I think we were late, but the traffic was out of control...and I thought the driving in China was bad!!!). We spent the entire day meeting with various people from the Physical Education Organization, the National Olympic Committee, the Women's Sports Federation, and several universities. I can't even put into words how amazed I am by *how much* is going on for women's sports here!!!! WOW! I would have never, even in a million years, guessed that *so* many girls and women are playing sports, studying sports, managing sports, and involved in sports on so many levels!!!! My assumptions of inactivity, disorganization, low interest, lack of opportunities, and apathy toward sport could not have been any further from the truth!
- Today we also visited a few “salons” – that's what they call the gymnasiums. When Roya looked in her appointment book and told us that we were going to meet some athletes at a “salon,” we thought they were taking us to a spa for a new hairstyle, pedicure, and massage! Roya laughed out loud when I told her *where* we thought she was taking us!
- We learned that there are a few “salons” just for women, maybe 5 or 6 in Tehran (city of 12 million people) and that some “salons” are open for men *and* women, but *never* at the same time. The “salons” that are “shared” are only open for women a couple hours a day and typically not open at very convenient times (according to several educators, administrators and athletes we spoke with). Seems like access to facilities is one of the major concerns here...the topic came up several times yesterday and today.
- When we were at one of the universities today, a professor with her Ph.D. in physical education asked us for books on:
 - Sport Sciences
 - Specialized Training
 - Sports Nutrition
 - Pre- and post-game “programming”
 - Sport Psychology

She said that most coaches first work on [physical] training and teaching skills/techniques, but that they need more experience teaching and understanding the tactics/strategies of their respective sports. Then she said that professors specialize in one sport and a maximum of two fields of study. I'm not sure exactly what she meant ...maybe I was losing some of the meaning in the translation? The last thing she talked about was the need for more qualified *women educators and coaches* – because men can't *usually* teach or coach the female students/athletes (due to the segregation of the sexes in public places). Therefore, more women are needed to educate and train the rapidly growing number of female students and athletes in Iran who want to study or learn about topics such as: Sports Management, Sport Psychology, Exercise Science, Sports Nutrition, Coaching, and more.

- I wonder if I *could* ever teach at a sports university in Iran? How cool would that be? It would be amazing on so many levels. We could help answer some of their requests for more qualified teachers and coaches. It would also reinforce our claims about the power of women's sports as an intentional tool to promote peaceful relations and meaningful dialogue between our countries! This really confirms how important it is for me to go back to school for my master's and Ph.D. I've put been putting it off for way too long: "It will take too long, it will cost too much, and I won't be able to travel as much for GSP..." I know they're all legit reasons, but I need to get serious and "just do it." Besides...my goal since 1993 was to complete my Ph.D. before I turn 40...knowing how long it takes me to write, I better get started this year – that will give me 11 years! ☺
- New Goal: complete master's degree and Ph.D. in 6 years = 2006
- Check into programs and begin filling out applications when I return home.
- Ask Steve about any sources of funding (?) and areas of study that might be most relevant and useful for GSP's work. I am thinking about Sport Psychology and something in the social, anthropological, or political sciences.

Journal Entry 3 – February 18, 2000

- Great day! We went to our first competition and got to see a women's basketball game! What an experience...
- Many of the "stereotypes" I held about Iranian sportswomen were challenged *and* altered... today was, *no doubt*, one of the most amazing experiences of my life!
- After a few meetings in the morning, our driver and hosts took us to *Hijab Sports Gymnasium* (an all-women's sports facility – interesting name for a gym, huh?) to watch the national team of Iran take on Azerbaijan's national team in the *Solidarity Cup Basketball Tournament*. The small tournament hosted teams from Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, and the National and Junior National teams from Iran.

Solidarity Cup Tournaments are sponsored by the ICWSSC for the purposes of: (1) to promoting managerial, executive and technical ability of women, (2) developing Muslim women in sport.

- The anticipation on the way to the game almost killed me, literally and figuratively! Navigating Tehran’s insane traffic reached a whole new level today when I urged our driver to, “*Hurry, so we don’t miss the opening tip-off.*” Mohammed, a typically meek and devoutly religious man who was responsible for transporting us from one meeting or event to another, transformed into a mix between legendary NASCAR driver Dale Earnhardt and the Incredible Hulk! Without a doubt, it was the scariest half an hour of my life and I was absolutely certain that I would die today on the streets of Tehran. Mohammed drove the *wrong* direction on absurdly busy one-way streets, ramped over several curbs to take advantage of *any* open space on sidewalks, and bullied (with a steady hand on the *horn*) his way across several lanes of traffic at insanely busy intersections. I almost wet my pants more than once and decided to cover my eyes, hold on tight to my backpack, and pray that we would not kill someone else or ourselves. Thanks God, we made it...*and we even made it on time!* Mohammed was proud. I was relieved.....and numb.

I jumped out of the car and ran toward the gymnasium as fast as I could. Just before I stepped inside, Roya yelled for me to wait.

Sarah [smiling]: Ok, but please, tell everyone to hurry up! We can’t miss tip-off... not after Mohammed just went “NASCAR-Psycho” to get us here on time!

Roya, smiling back: “Ok, but Sarah, you have too much energy. Please, wait for me.”

Sarah: “Ok, ok...”

Roya caught up and we walked through the front door together. Immediately, we found ourselves face to face with two ladies dressed in black chadors. Neither one of them smiled – in fact, they seemed *way* too serious for “game-day door-greeters” – not at all like the door-greeters I’m used to seeing at Wal-Mart.

Sarah smiling: “Salom, khoobi?” (Hello, how are you?)

No response. The women looked at me and then turned their attention to Roya.

Roya (in Farsi): Hello Misses. How are you? Please, we have four American coaches who are attending today’s match between Iran and Azerbaijan. My name is Roya and I am the translator assigned to our guests from the ICWSSC.

“Something, something, something” in Farsi – I didn’t understand a word, but smiled and nodded my head like I comprehended every word they said.

Roya: Sarah, please excuse me, the lady must search your bag and explore your clothing and pockets. Please, give her your camera. Do you have a mobile phone with you? After you give her your bag and camera, go stand behind that curtain and the other lady will check your pockets and clothing.

Sarah (laughing): Check my pockets and clothing for what????.....Roya, are you kidding?

Roya: No, Sarah, please, it’s ok, just give her your bag and camera. She will give you a ticket to hold and when the match is finished, you can return the paper and she will personally hand your belongings to you.

Sarah: I don’t have a mobile phone, but I do have a camera. I’m so confused...so...I should give the camera to her now and then give her my bag to check also? Are you coming with me and that other lady behind the curtain?

Roya: Yes, of course I’m coming...Why do your eyes change now, Sarah? You were so excited...don’t worry, dear, this is normal.

I thought to myself, “*Normal? Normal?* For who? I’ve never had to hand over my camera and I’ve certainly never been frisked as a player or as a spectator at a women’s basketball game! I *have* had my bags checked, but for things like diet cokes and M&M’s when I’ve gone to watch games but... “*normal?*”...I’m learning that “normal” must be a really ambiguous term!”

I handed the “search” lady my camera and bag then reluctantly followed Roya into a “room” fashioned out of heavy black curtains hung from four steel poles set up in the lobby of the gymnasium. No one accompanied us behind the curtains, so I asked Roya some questions...

Sarah: So Roya, I’m sorry for not understanding, but why did they take my camera? Are women’s basketball games really a high-level security risk? What are they afraid of happening?

Roya: Honey, they are not afraid of anything. Haven’t you learned anything while you have been in my country? We don’t allow photos to be taken of our women without hijab. It’s a tradition, our beliefs, our religion, our way of life. No one can bring a camera or mobile phone into the salon or to any women’s competitions because we must be certain that no woman or family is dishonored. Always remember, if we are not wearing hijab, we cannot be photographed.

Sarah: Ahhhh, ok, ok, I get it. Roya, all of this is new to me, so excuse me for acting so confused and surprised. But you know, so much is beginning to make sense to me. *No wonder* no one thinks Iranian women are playing sports! It's because we never *see* them playing...no photos, no stories, no videos, no media coverage, and no information about *how* active some Iranian sportswomen really are. I never thought about it like this before – it's not that Iranian women *aren't* playing sports, it's that we have *never seen proof of* them playing sports...therefore, we assume that Iranian women *don't* play sports. Wow, that was a lot, but I think I'm starting to understand!

The “frisking” lady walked into the room and looked directly at me.

Roya (grinning): Don't be afraid, Sarah, she's just like your grandmother...

“Something, something, something in Farsi...”

Roya: She's asking for you to lift your arms above your head and stand with your feet shoulder width apart.

After we got “patted down,” I followed Roya toward the basketball court. Even from the “frisking room,” I could hear so much noise...whistles, foghorns, clapping, shouting, chanting...when we rounded the corner, I *could not* believe my eyes! Hundreds of fans filled the entire arena – girls and women everywhere. They were waving Iranian flags, jumping up and down, blowing foghorns, ringing cowbells, and chanting,
 “EE-Ron,” clap, clap;
 “EE-Ron,” stomp, stomp,
 “EE-Ron,” clap, clap,
 “EE-Ron,” stomp, stomp...

I've *never* experienced so much enthusiasm at a *women's* basketball game! It was super crazy and sooooo much fun!

- Iran won the game 70-62. The level of play was similar to an average to above-average girl's high school game (in Kentucky). The teams lacked basic fundamental skills and relied more on “showboating” or mimicking NBA stars' moves, but without the elite physical ability to execute such skills.
- I wonder how that's even possible though...Western television and satellites are illegal in Iran...that's what I've been told. So...how do they know how NBA stars play the game? I'm going to have to check into this....
- The game was sloppy and both teams played without the cohesiveness of a well-organized team...individuals tried to do too much and even blamed and yelled at teammates during the game for making mistakes. Both teams played woman-to-

woman defense but no one helped anyone else...it was every woman for herself. I guess if I had to give a report about women's basketball in Iran after today, I would say: (1) The team lacked basic fundamental skills, (2) the team did not play as a unit, (3) the team blamed one another and yelled at one another during the game and during time-outs – no one encouraged anyone else, (4) the referees hustled, worked hard, but lacked game management skills and made poor judgment calls consistently, and (5) the fans were amazing and influenced the momentum of the game.

- Much to my surprise....most of the women *were* athletic! Their body types closely resembled women's basketball players in America – they just weren't as tall. I was completely fascinated by this! The teams wore baggy basketball shorts and tank top shirts, just like we do at home...they sported high-top basketball shoes, headbands, wristbands, and sports bras. I was having the hardest time *picturing* what this moment would actually look like. I couldn't *see* them in anything but their garb – and there's no way to tell what kind of body-type they have under all that covering. But I saw it today for myself – most are lean and strong; they have defined muscles and move with grace, strength, and coordination! I will never forget today!

Journal Entry 4 & 5 – February 19 & 20, 2000

- I think the adrenaline is wearing off and the lack of sleep is setting in. Yesterday and today – giant blurs...waaaayyy too tired to journal last night. We've had several more meetings with university professors and sports administrators since the last time I wrote. Everyone has been so kind and very appreciative of our presence and effort to exchange knowledge about various sports-related topics.
- About 45 people, men *and* women, gathered today for our short lecture about strength & conditioning, injuries, nutrition, and psychological health. They asked a lot of great questions and we were able to answer most of them (I think our presentation could have been much stronger – this *really* bothered me today).
- One thing I was happy with however was our strategy when we couldn't answer a question: Instead of making something up or rambling to talk our way out of being on the spot, we *asked* for help from audience members. Usually, someone stepped up and had something very valuable to offer. I liked "sharing" the microphone – I learned a lot about how they approach, understand, and apply theories and practices in sport.
- I was really surprised to learn *just* how many Iranian people have earned graduate degrees in various sports-related disciplines. I hate to admit my own stereotypes, but I assumed, incorrectly, that most Iranian people were uneducated. I don't know why I thought this, but I did.

- The more I think about today, the more uncomfortable I feel about our status here as “experts” in women’s sports. I don’t share the same academic accomplishments, research contributions, or educational credentials. I’m just a 26- year-old “kid” who has an undergraduate degree in Sports Administration and a few years of international experience as a coach and sports consultant.
- Most of the women (and men) we have met so far have received their master’s and/or Ph.D.s in sports-related disciplines from respected universities all over the world. This is such *great* motivation for me! No more excuses...I’m going back to school! Being here allows me to *see* just how important it is!!!! *Especially if we are going to continue to work in Iran!!!!*
- On to a lighter note, something else that really surprised me...the Iranian people *LOVE* to laugh! It’s made our time here a lot fun! Not sure why, but I expected everyone to be so serious, reserved, stoic...but not so! We have laughed so much together that my jaws ache at night!
- We haven’t been able to workout at all since we’ve been here – that’s been hard. I feel lethargic and soft. Even though we’ve asked several times, there hasn’t been a good time *or* place available for us. I think I understand better now what the women were saying about access, hours, and opportunities to exercise. I can see now why this presents such an obstacle for Iranian girls and women to *get* involved or *stay* involved with physical activity and exercise.

Cultural knowledge and fun facts update:

1. We never arrive anywhere on time because of the traffic. It doesn’t seem to bother anyone, but it drives me crazy! I can’t stand the thought of making someone wait 30 minutes or 1 hour or 2 hours for us to arrive. I feel rude and embarrassed, even though I have *no* control over the situation!

2. The “Art of Iranian Tea-Drinking”

Hot tea with sugar cubes

Served at every meeting, at every sporting event, and in every home

First, it is common practice to put an entire sugar cube in your mouth and then drink the scalding hot tea. The sugar cube immediately dissolves, then the process is repeated until the tea glass is empty (which typically takes our friends about 2 swallows).

For me, it usually takes about 15 minutes before the tea is cooled off enough to even touch the edges of the tiny glass (with no handles).

I usually place the sugar cube on the right side of my mouth (it hurts my teeth too much to put the chunk of pure sugar on the left side)

Then I sip, and sip, and sip...until I *finally* finish off an *entire* 1 ounce of “chai.”

After I place my teacup and saucer down on the table in front of me, the “tea runner” politely brings me another...and another...and another.

At one point this week, maybe it was yesterday, I decided that my dental health was becoming equally as important as the cultural gesture to consume 20-30 straight sugar cubes and the same number of “shots” of hot tea throughout an entire day of multiple meetings.

Roya has found great humor in my attempts to be so “culturally sensitive.” She informed me today, however, after noticing yesterday that I brushed my teeth in between every meeting, that I would not be considered rude if I didn’t accept a sugar cube every time it was offered. She also suggested that if I leave a little bit of tea in the bottom of my glass, the server would stop bringing me more rounds. Thanks Roya!

3. The “Spread” – assorted cookies, fruit and cucumbers served with tea and sugar cubes.

This has also been problematic for many reasons:

(a) I have consumed approximately the same number of cookies as I have glasses of tea everyday

(b) No one else on our team accepts the cookies, therefore, I feel especially responsible for making a “dent” in what is offered so that our hosts don’t assume we are “rude Americans.”

Thankfully, my tea and cookie consumption patterns provided Roya a perfect opportunity to teach me today about an important cultural practice called “*t’aarof*.”

T’aarof means something like extreme politeness with pretense, a verbal match of ping-pong-politeness.

One person offers something, the other person refuses (even if they really want what’s offered), then the first person offers again, and then the other person refuses – this continues until someone breaks or until it becomes so ridiculous to both parties that one person finally concedes.

Apparently t'aarof applies to more than just tea and cookies, but thankfully I learned to know when it's ok to refuse another glass of tea or another tasty cookie...

Learning about t'aarof earlier in the week may have prevented me from gaining the "freshman 15" during a 6-day trip to Iran!

Journal Entry 6 – February 21, 2000

"Top Ten" list of requests for training, books, and/or coaches and friendly competitions:

1. Team handball
 2. Basketball
 3. Volleyball
 4. Measurement and Evaluation
 5. Physical Education
 6. Referees (various sports)
 7. Sport Psychology
 8. Sport Management
 9. Athletic Training
 10. Introduce of new team sports that can be played in Islamic hijab (softball maybe?)
- I can't believe we leave tonight/tomorrow – our flight departs at 4am, Roya and Neda will pick us up at midnight. They said traffic might be bad around the airport so we should leave in plenty of time. I didn't argue, *not one bit!* Everything went by so fast, way too fast!!!! I'm not ready to leave. We just got here and there is so much more to do, to see, to learn. I need more time – I have so many unanswered questions. What if this is the first and last time I ever visit Iran??? I want to know so much more about their lives...more about their families – do their mothers *and* fathers support those playing sports? Did their mothers *and/or* fathers participate in sports? If so, at what levels? What were sports like for women before the Islamic Revolution? How does it compare to now? Do they have brothers? Sisters? I want to know who introduced them to sports; how they gained access to sports; why they chose their respective sports; what they have learned through sports; what makes playing sports "worth it" in their lives? I *hate* that we didn't have time to talk about these things...*and so much more!!!!*
 - I *really, really, really* want to come back here again. I have never felt this strongly about a place or a people...China was special, but this feels different to me and I can't explain why. It's really amazing when I think about it. Somehow, even though we were only here for one week, I feel deeply connected and curious about their lives. It's strange, I think the women I've met this week have challenged me to know more about the history of women's sports in my own

country....makes me think about the women (and men) who fought so hard for Title IX.

- Crazy, now I'm remembering all the times mom and dad told me how much I should appreciate the opportunity to "grow up on the heels of the Title IX era." They always encouraged me to be appreciative of the opportunities I had to play baseball, basketball, and to earn an athletic scholarship. It makes more sense to me now...before, I assumed my access and opportunities as a female athlete were like everyone else's...I never had anyone or any other place to *really* compare with my childhood through college experiences. Who would have ever thought that being 7,000 miles away from home, in a completely different culture, would bring me closer to my own history? It's like the women I've met this week have embodied the absent faces of pioneers from my own country who I never had a chance to know *or* to thank. After my time here this week, I have a better appreciation for my own sporting experiences and as a result, the context of my own experiences as an athlete seem incredibly more relevant than ever before! I love these life moments...these epiphanies!
- Unlike in my own country, since being in Iran I've actually met *the women who should be* "thanked" for their service and dedication to improving girls and women's sports. I know their names *and* their faces; I've seen their commitment and dedication in action. I've heard their dreams and witnessed some of the barriers they face. These women have captured my imagination and earned my sincere respect – they never tire, they never give up, they never stop fighting for improvements – at least this has been my experience during the one *very* busy week I've just spent with them.
- As part of the "closing ceremony," we ate dinner tonight at a beautifully decorated "traditional" restaurant with Mrs. Hashemi and several of her colleagues. We sat on beautiful Persian carpets, ate ab-gusht (mashed water-meat) and drank doogh (a fermented yogurt drink)...and listened to live traditional Persian music. Tonight was really special!
- We didn't get to spend very much time with Mrs. Hashemi (I understand she stays pretty busy!), but in every sports-related activity over the past week, everyone who mentioned her name spoke with the upmost respect and appreciation for efforts on behalf of Muslim sportswomen everywhere! I sort of get the impression that her influence has significantly reached beyond the borders of her own country!
- During dinner, Mrs. Hashemi asked us to give a short report on our time and activities while in Tehran. She asked specifically for our impressions of athletes, coaches, referees, professors, administrators, programs, and the level of

competitions. She also wanted to know if GSP would be interested in continuing a meaningful and active relationship with the ICWSSC.

- This is what I shared with Mrs. Hashemi, “It is very unfortunate, but in America, we never have the opportunity to hear about women’s sports in Iran. Therefore, we didn’t have accurate perceptions about women’s sports before coming to Tehran. However, thanks to your invitation, our ignorant ideas have been replaced with a much different truth about women’s sports in Iran. During this week, we met very active, strong, and committed women who consistently demonstrated passion, motivation, and competence in their respective roles. Now, I have tremendous respect for what you and your colleagues are doing for girls and women in Iran who want to participate in recreational physical activity or who desire to play sports on a competitive level. GSP would be honored to continue a meaningful and active partnership with the ICWSSC. In fact, and I can’t speak for all of us at the table, but I would like to ask you a question? With your permission, I would like to appoint myself as an “ambassador for Iranian sportswomen.” My duties would include:

Wherever and whenever I have the chance to speak about my experiences with Iranian sportswomen, I will do so.

Wherever and whenever I have the chance to dispel the myths and/or negative stereotypes about women’s sports in Iran, I will do so.

Wherever and whenever I have the chance to tell the stories of Iranian sportswomen, I will do so.

These are just a few of my ideas right now.”

- Mrs. Hashemi smiled – I think she knew I was sincere, but she also understood that my self-appointed title was *just that*...a self-appointed, unofficial gesture to demonstrate my respect for Iranian sportswomen and encourage a long-term friendship between our organizations. Nevertheless, she politely “agreed.” Now I can’t wait to get home and tell everyone about the things I’ve seen and learned this week. This week has truly been life-changing for me and I can’t wait to get home and talk about it!
- Oh yeah, and the best part is that it sounds like GSP will be invited back to Iran someday...I just hope it’s sooner rather than later!

Chapter 5: How I Came to Autoethnography

Jump forward to May 2008

I had just left my Tehran hotel room and was on my way to our afternoon training session when I received a phone call from the Softball Federation's vice-president.

Sarah: Hello, Dr. Zardooz, how are you this afternoon?

Dr. Zardooz (in English): I am doing well, Sarah, how are you? Did you have a good training this morning? Do you need anything? We hope you are comfortable. My wife says hello to you and welcomes you again to Iran.

Sarah: Thank you sir. Please tell your kind wife hello for me too. Is she doing well? She is healthy? Please, give her my regards. Yes sir, everything is going well. We are always happy to be playing softball. We are good and don't need anything. Thank you for asking.

Dr. Zardooz: Very good...about tomorrow morning's schedule, I would like to meet you at the federation office to talk about the future of women's softball in Iran. I will send Hassan to pick you up at 8 o'clock, ok? After our meeting, you can return to your hotel to rest and begin training again in the afternoon. Have a good day and I will see you tomorrow morning.

Sarah: Thank you. I look forward to our meeting. Good-bye.

Dr. Zardooz: Good-bye.

NEXT MORNING:

Phone rings...

Sarah: Hello.

Mehrdad (a front desk clerk at the hotel who speaks very good English): Ms. Sarah, good morning. Please excuse me, but your driver from the Softball Federation is here for you. Please come to the hotel lobby now.

Sarah: Thank you, Mehrdad, please tell Hassan I will be right down.

Mehrdad: Yes, Ms. Sarah, I will tell him now. Do you need any help carrying your bags of equipment?

Sarah: No thank you, Mehrdad...I am only going for a meeting this morning, no softball training until this afternoon.

Mehrdad: Very well then, Ms. Sarah. I will tell Hassan you are coming.

I put on my black manteaux and blue scarf, grab my backpack, and head down the stairs.

Sarah: Good morning Hassan! You look tired, is everything ok? Maybe you had a hard baseball practice yesterday?

Hassan (smiling): Yes, ok, ok. Hurry coach Sarah, traffic is too bad right now. I don't want us to be late. Come on.

Mehrdad (listening in on our conversation and laughing): Tehran traffic...everyone is late. If you are on time – you are early and if you are late – you are on time. What is time anyway? Everyone knows *this* is Tehran!

Hassan and I both laugh.

Sarah (jokingly): Ok, Hassan. I don't know what you're waiting on, let's go. I can't be late for my meeting.

Hassan and Mehrdad laugh as we walk toward the exit of the hotel lobby. Mehrdad politely points to my scarf, indicating that I need to “fix it” before I go any further. I look at him with an appreciative smile, pull my scarf forward, and shove my short hair backward. I can always count on Mehrdad to kindly look out for me. As a “favorite American guest” at the Azadi Olympic Hotel, we've become good friends over the past few years. Hassan walks briskly in front of me and opens the sliding passenger door to the white, 1980s minivan. I jump in the first row of seats. Hassan gets in the driver's seat, buckles his seatbelt, stomps on the clutch, and speeds away from the hotel.

Sarah: Hassan, do you know why I am meeting with Dr. Zardooz this morning.

Hassan: No.

Sarah: Ok, I guess we'll find out soon enough.

Hassan glances at me in the rear view mirror to acknowledge that he heard me. I can tell, though, that he is much more interested in successfully navigating through Tehran's morning rush hour than concentrating on a conversation with me. My Farsi is far from good and Hassan's English is no better. Somehow though, we always find a way to communicate...even if we just end up laughing at each other.

After nearly an hour of weaving in and out of traffic and 350 honking horns later, we arrive at the Softball Federation offices. Hassan drops me off on the opposite side of the

street and I successfully brave my way across several lanes of traffic at a busy six-way intersection. I climb the stairs to the sixth floor of the office complex and walk in the door just after 9 o'clock.

Arastoo, a part-time secretary for Dr. Zardooz welcomes me and we greet each other with a traditional "Persian kiss" on each cheek.

Arastoo (in very good English): Good morning my dear Sarah. Did you rest well?

Sarah: Yes, Arastoo, thank you. Did you rest well?

Arastoo: Yes, of course, as you know Sarah, I am always sleeping well because I am dreaming of my future husband and children.

Sarah (laughing): Oh yes, how could I forget? And how was your Prince Charming last night?

Arastoo: He was lovely. This time we were having a picnic at the Caspian Sea and our three beautiful children were playing in the water.

Sarah: You are so funny! You always make me laugh, that's what I love about you.

Arastoo giggles and re-adjusts her chador.

Sarah: Am I late? Is Dr. Zardooz here yet?

Arastoo: Ms. Sarah, please forgive me, but as you know traffic in Tehran is too bad at this hour. He just called and said he was on his way. He is stuck in a traffic jam about thirty minutes away. He will be here soon. Please sit down and make yourself at home. Do you want tea?

Sarah: No, thank you...I'm good.

Arastoo: I hope I am not being rude, but I would like to get some work done. Sometimes, I think this part-time job takes up more hours than my full-time university studies. Excuse me please, if you don't mind. Dr. Zardooz will be here soon; if you need me I'll be in my office.

I sit down for a second but then decide to get up and look around the office at the large-print wall pictures of Iran's softball and baseball players. I recognize most everyone in the photos and feel an overwhelming sense of pride. I am proud of what they have accomplished in such a short amount of time and I am honored to be a part of their history.

Dr. Zardooz walks in: Good morning, Sarah. Please excuse me for being late...traffic is too bad at this hour in Tehran. Please, give me one moment and I'll be right with you.

Sarah: Yes sir...no problem. I'll be right here.

Arastoo follows Dr. Zardooz into his office with a large stack of papers. After fifteen more minutes, Arastoo comes back into the waiting room.

Arastoo: Sarah, Dr. Zardooz is ready to see you now.

I walk into his office and take my seat across from him at the long conference table next to his personal desk. A gray-bearded man, named Ali, brings us hot tea, fruit, and assorted cookies.

Dr. Zardooz: Sarah, how are you feeling today? Did you take a good rest last night? How is your family? Have you spoken with your mother? Please, send your family my highest and best regards.

Sarah: Thank you. I am well. My parents are doing well and say hello to you and your family. Steve and everyone at GSP also send their greetings. How is your family doing? Please tell them hello again for me.

Dr. Zardooz: Thank you, thank you. Yes, thank you, Sarah. How are the players doing?

Sarah: They are doing very well. It is amazing to see how much they improve each day. Most of them work so hard. It is obvious how important softball is to them.

Dr. Zardooz: Sarah, it is critical for you to know that sports are very important in our society. They teach us many lessons about life and being successful in sports gives people, especially women, the confidence and skills to overcome many adversities in daily life. Sports help people overcome depression, which is a big problem in many societies. Physically active women become strong wives and good mothers...this is important to us. For our entire society to be successful, we must have strong, smart, and healthy women actively participating in every area of social life. We see how important this matter really is. As the mothers of our children, we understand the value of these things. We want our daughters, wives, sisters, aunts, and grandmothers to be healthy and happy and to make good decisions for their families and their selves. This is why I am so committed to women's sports and specifically women's softball since I am the Federation's vice president, as you know. I want our women's softball program to grow throughout Iran. It is my dream that girls and women will be playing softball in every Iranian city. I am also interested in preparing and sending a National Team to compete in the 2010 Asian Games to be held in Guangzhou, China. This is

why I have asked you to meet with me today. As you know, we have selected softball as a new sport for our women because the IRI-IOC believes that the more opportunities our women have to compete on an international stage, the more chances we have to earn medals and represent our country with great pride. This is one way we believe in this idea of women's softball.

Sarah: I really appreciate what you are saying and congratulate you on everything you have already accomplished for women's softball in Iran. I am happy to hear more about your ideas for a National Team and as you know, GSP is committed to helping the Federation reach its goals for women's sports.

Dr. Zardooz: Thank you, Sarah. Most importantly, we need a coach. We need a coach from the outside to train our players. We also need this person to train Iranian coaches so that eventually we can represent ourselves. Sarah, is it possible for you to be our coach for six months or one year to help us prepare for the 2010 Asian Games?

Sarah: I am honored that you would ask me, however, it would be difficult for me right now because I am trying to finish my doctoral degree. This is not a good time for me to leave my university. As a Ph.D. and professor yourself, I know you can understand my dilemma.

Dr. Zardooz: Of course, I understand. I don't want to interfere with your studies, but please, can you hurry up and finish?

We both laugh out loud...

INTERIOR MONOLOGUE:

Somehow I feel unusually "connected" to Dr. Zardooz today...like we are on the same page more than ever before. Maybe because this is the first time he's opened up about his views on women's sports...or maybe because we are talking about a shared educational experience? I don't know, but I feel like today is special...

Sarah: Perhaps, for the time being, we could consider three months instead of six months? I feel certain that my university and GSP would be supportive of this opportunity. I can email them tonight after dinner. It would also allow me the chance to finish my coursework in the fall and complete my comprehensive exams in the spring before I return here in the summer. I would love to be able to collect the remainder of my data with the softball teams during those three months.

Dr. Zardooz: Yes, three months would be helpful for both of us. I agree with your ideas to come during the summer, maybe May through the beginning of August? It is

beneficial for our softball players and also for your research. This plan is a good compromise for me. However, is it possible for you [GSP] to help us find another coach for the remainder of the year, for the months after you return to your university?

Sarah: It would be an honor and privilege, Dr. Zardooz. You know GSP will do everything we can to identify a suitable coach.

Dr. Zardooz: Thank you, Sarah. I wish you the best of luck on your exams. If GSP and your university agree, we will prepare the necessary paperwork for your visa very soon. Please excuse me, but I have another appointment now and you should get back to the hotel to prepare for the afternoon training session. There is a new team from Qom coming today...they are young students and have never played softball, so they are very excited about meeting you and trying out all of the new equipment!

Dr. Zardooz calls for Arastoo.

Arastoo: Yes, Dr. Zardooz?

Dr. Zardooz: Please tell Hassan that Sarah is ready to return to her hotel.

Arastoo: Yes sir, I will call for him now.

Two days later, I received emails from Steve and my university advisor. They both encouraged me to pursue the summer timeline. I called Dr. Zardooz on the same day and told him that I was ready to move forward and commit to coaching Iran's National Softball Team from May through August, 2009.

Later in the week, I met with Faezeh Hashemi to discuss my upcoming research proposal and to share the news about working with the National Softball Team during my summer "holiday." Mrs. Hashemi, a current Ph.D. student herself, agreed to work closely with me and offered access to IFWS archives, to research on women's sports published inside Iran, and to athletes, sports administrators, and educators. My goal was to return to my university in mid-August 2009 with additional data, as well as completed member

checks (Hatch, 2002) on the research I had formally collected since 2006 (and informally collected since 2000).

Comprehensive Exams

In August 2008, I returned to campus and during the fall semester successfully completed the rest of my coursework. In mid-January, I met with my dissertation committee. The meeting allowed me an opportunity to present my research ideas and a chance for us to discuss several important topics that I needed to cover in my upcoming comprehensive exams. We talked about the significance of addressing a historical, political and socio-cultural context of the study. We shared ideas about the current literature devoted to Muslim women in sports. Lastly, we considered different theoretical (feminist, post-colonial, postmodern, poststructural) and methodological approaches (ethnography, narrative inquiry, case study, participatory action research, and autoethnography).

By the end of our meeting, each committee member selected one of the aforementioned topics and arranged to meet with me individually to finalize a question for my comprehensive exams.

Professor Paul the Philosopher

*Dr. Paul*⁸: It's good to see you – how have you been since our committee meeting.

Sarah: Great – I'm really, really excited to get started! Honestly, I can't believe how things are working out for me to spend the whole summer in Iran. Even though I've been there several times, I never feel like there are enough hours in the day for everything I want to accomplish. I am really grateful for this opportunity!

Dr. Paul: Well, not to sound pessimistic, but you'll probably never feel like there is enough time to do everything you'd like to do. There will always be one more interview, or more time needed to access archives, or...well, you get my point.

Sarah: You're right...I'm sure I'll feel that way and based on my previous experiences, the Softball Federation will keep me really, really busy.

Dr. Paul: Let's talk about your exam question from me...have you nailed down your methodological approach yet?

Sarah: To be honest with you Professor, I'd love to do an autoethnography.

Dr. Paul: And to be honest with you Sarah, I'd rather you consider another method as long as you have access to the athletes in Iran again. I'd love to see you conduct more interviews, record more observations, and capture more photographs and video-footage.

Sarah: Really? I didn't expect to hear you say that?

Dr. Paul [*smiles*]: Well, as a young researcher about to seek out a career in the world of academia, I think all of us on your committee would rather you use a method that is more widely respected and understood (Sparkes, 2002).

Sarah: I appreciate your honesty and your advice. I would not be honest if I said I was not disappointed, but I do believe that narrative inquiry will allow me to accomplish very similar goals and remain committed to my overall research objectives.

Dr. Paul: Very good then, now, let's talk about some of the possible conflicts you may face as a researcher collecting data in Iran. I'm most interested in and curious about how you will reconcile particular issues concerning truth as you carry out your narrative inquiry....

⁸ Professor Paul is an actual member of my dissertation committee and this section is a composite re-creation of several conversations we have had over the past two years.

Unexpected turns

Two comprehensive exam questions into the dissertation process, I received a series of disheartening emails from the ISF and the IFWS. They informed me that, despite their hard-fought efforts, my application for a visa was likely to be postponed until a later and undetermined date. By late March, it was apparent that I would not be traveling to Tehran in the summer of 2009.

To: Sarah Hillyer
From: GSP
Date: March 30, 2009
Subject: Visa

Sarah,

This seems to be a final "no" that came this morning. Unfortunately there is no reason given. Haley and I fly back to Turkey tomorrow morning. I'll write IFWS today to ask them about your visa and can follow up with a phone call on Sat.

Peace to you,
 Keith

Reluctantly, I faced the disappointing truth and realized there was no time to waste or to feel sorry for myself. Rather, it was imperative that I identify a new strategy that would still allow me to accomplish my research goals. I contacted my committee members and told them the news. Sensing my frustration and borderline panic, my committee rallied around me. They sent encouraging emails, took me out to lunch, and offered their heartfelt support and ideas on ways to move forward. Collectively, everyone agreed that the best place to "start over" was in the literature...just what every doctoral student wants to hear!

Underneath stacks of papers, I came across the 2000 Special Issue of the *Sociology of Sport Journal*. I decided to thumb through it again because I couldn't remember why it had been relegated to the "don't use" pile. This time, however, I

couldn't put it down. The articles spoke directly to me. The authors captured my senses.

As Richardson (2000b) wrote,

Casting social science into evocative forms reveals the rhetoric and the underlying labor of the production as well as social science's potential as a human endeavor because evocative writing touches us where we live, in our bodies. Through it we can experience the self-reflexive and transformational process of self-creation. Trying out evocative forms, we relate differently to our material; we know it differently. We find ourselves attending to feelings, ambiguities, temporal sequences, blurred experiences, and so on; we struggle to find a textual place for ourselves, our doubts, and our uncertainties. (p. 11)

I found freedom in the articles I read that day. The combination of social science coupled with aesthetic representations inspired me; they prompted me to care, to feel, to wish, to hope, to move, to act (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). I empathized with the characters in the stories; characters with names and faces. As someone who has been so intimately involved with the Iranian sports movement for women, I cannot write from a detached position and do this project justice. Evocative writing allows me to recognize my role in the production (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), my personal transformation, and my own uncertainties in trying to textualize the "Other."

SELF-TALK:

Oh yes, now I remember, this special issue was "meant to create a space for sport sociologists who have turned to more evocative ways of writing than standard practices" (Sparkes, 2000, p. 1). Autoethnography. Personal narratives. Short stories. Photo

essays. Poetry. Dialogue. I wonder...now that I'm not going to Iran this summer...would my committee reconsider autoethnography?

Dr. Paul did say, "And to be honest with you Sarah, I'd rather you consider another method *as long as you have access to the athletes in Iran again.*"

The only reason my committee "closed the door" on autoethnography in the first place was because they wanted to *protect* me as a young researcher (Sparkes, 2002). But now...I have *no* idea when or if I'll receive another visa for Iran. I can't postpone my degree and just wait until I am granted entry into Iran again. I *have* to move forward. I am too committed to this research project to stop now. I have collected too much data and have made too many promises. *Promises*. I must keep my promise to tell their stories!

Breath. You know your committee members...they are wise *and* protective. They are genuinely concerned about you using a method that is, at least in sport sociology, still considered to be "located at the boundaries of disciplinary practices and raises questions as to what constitutes proper research" (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21). Ok, Sarah, think about this...you need to find some convincing reasons why autoethnography is "worth the risk." Keep reading. Keep searching...there is *certainly* literature out there to help you articulate why you feel like autoethnography is the "right" methodology to accomplish my research objectives. Regardless, you need to let your committee know that it is time to consider alternative data collection strategies.

From: Hillyer, Sarah J
Sent: Tuesday, March 31, 2009 11:40 AM
To: Committee Members
Subject: FW: Passport Information

Dear Committee,

We have little reason/hope to believe the news for my visa will change. It seems that the final answer is "no," without any explanation at this time. It's extremely disappointing...but I believe there are ways for

me to move forward with my research (Skype, Emails, visiting Iranian athletes who have moved to the U.S. or Canada, or Autoethnography).

Thanks – just trying to keep everyone updated,
Sarah

On 3/31/09 2:15 PM,
Committee Chairperson wrote:

So sorry Sarah. But you're right, there are alternatives and you will do very well with any of the approaches.

Dr. D

From: Hillyer, Sarah J
Sent: Tuesday, March 31, 2009 2:17 PM
To: Committee Chairperson
Subject: Re: Passport Information

Thanks Dr. D.

I'm plugging away – The more I read, the more I am convinced that autoethnography is the best way to go.

Thanks again,
Sarah

On 3/31/09 2:21 PM,
Committee Chairperson wrote:

I feel that also Sarah. You'll go a great job with an autoethnographic approach/method. It's exciting!

Dr. D

From: Hillyer, Sarah J
Sent: Tuesday, March 31, 2009 9:00 PM
To: Committee Chairperson
Subject: Re: Passport Information

Dr. D,

Thank you. I am excited too! I just finished reading a few chapters out of Heewon Chang's (2007) book titled, "Autoethnography as Method." WOW!!! It's soooo helpful! She approaches autoethnography from a very multicultural perspective – very cool. She also wrote a section called: Benefits of Autoethnography...it's PERFECT. Do you have time to meet this week? I think it's exactly what I need! I can't wait to share it with you – thanks again, Dr. D. I really appreciate your support and encouragement!

Sarah

Benefits of autoethnography

In the following section, I will outline the benefits listed by Chang (2007) as it relates to my own ethnographic journey as an ambassador for Iranian sportswomen. I

would like to focus on the following three elements of autoethnography: (1) Autoethnography offers a research method friendly to researchers, (2) Autoethnography enhances cultural understanding of self and others, and (3) Autoethnography can also help transform researchers and readers (listeners) in the process.

(1) Autoethnography offers a research method friendly to researchers:

“Methodologically speaking, autoethnography is researcher-friendly. This inquiry method allows researchers easy access to the primary data source from the beginning because the source is the researchers themselves” (Chang, 2007, p. 52).

Since 2000, I have traveled to Iran nine times. Naturally, I have accumulated a multitude of personal memories, which according to Chang (2007), are the “building block[s] of autoethnography because the past gives a context to the present self and memory opens a door to the richness of the past” (p. 71). With my personal memories, I am able to create an autobiographical timeline, specifically “one that zooms in on border-crossing experiences that occur when you become friends with others of difference or others of opposition or when you place yourself in unfamiliar places or situations,” (Chang, 2007, p. 74). Chronicling the past is a useful strategy for me to organize and give sequential order to the pieces of information I collected from my memories, the primary data source in autoethnography (Chang, 2007; Ellis, 2004; Bochner & Ellis, 1996).

In addition to personal memories, I have also collected scores of data from external sources, such as travel journals, field notes, field journals, personal observations, photographs, videos, newspaper articles, on-line articles, emails, literature, official IFWS documents and publications, and formal interviews with various Iranian athletes, coaches,

administrators, and educators. The data collected from these external sources provided “additional perspectives and contextual information to help [me] investigate and examine my subjectivity” (Chang, 2007, p. 103).

(2) Autoethnography enhances cultural understanding of self and others:

“The ‘forces’ that shape people’s sense of self include nationality, religion, gender, education, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and geography. Understanding ‘the forces’ also helps them examine their preconceptions and feelings about others” (Chang, 2007, p. 52).

Writing an autoethnography about my border-crossing experiences (Chang, 2007) will: (a) allow me to turn the researcher gaze upon myself; (b) allow me to use my interpersonal lens to examine my own “forces” as an American, as a Christian, as a woman, as a coach, as a researcher, or as a friend while in Iran; and (c) allow me to examine my preconceptions and feelings about Iranian sportswomen.

(3) Autoethnography can also help transform researchers and readers in the process:

“Personal engagement in autoethnographic stories frequently stirs the self-reflection of listeners, a powerful by-product of this research inquiry” (Chang, 2007, p. 53).

The following narrative is about a spontaneous conversation regarding my upcoming research inquiry that took place after the last softball class in Tehran. Following camp, nine softball players from Tehran invited me for dinner at a local Western-style fast-food restaurant. The impromptu letter-writing session that stemmed from our conversations over burgers and pizza transformed my perspective for this dissertation project – the research was no longer “mine” but “ours” and the dissertation became just another avenue for promoting cross-cultural understanding between nations.

Our Dream, My Promise

FLASHBACK:

In May 2008, we gathered to celebrate the last day of another successful softball camp and to talk about the future of women's softball in Iran. After we arrived, we pulled several tables together, situated the chairs, and placed our order at the fast-food counter. Then, we talked about the players' achievements during the month-long training camp and about how much they had improved since the softball program began over six years ago.

Neda: So, Coach Sarah, are you really going to write a term paper about us and make a movie about us playing softball?

Negar, looking embarrassed interrupted her, "Neda, don't be so rude. It's not a term paper she's writing, it's her dissertation!"

Neda laughed and said, "Really? Will we have to call you "Dr." Coach Sarah?"

We all laughed. I was elated she brought up the subject of "me writing about them."

Neda's questions were interrupted when two teenage boys delivered several trays of "fattening western food." After everyone situated themselves again,

I turned to Neda and said, "Can we talk while we are eating?"

"Yes, of course," she replied.

"I'd like to answer your questions. First of all, no, you won't need to call me Dr. Coach Sarah, but thank you for respectfully asking."

Everyone chuckled, and I continued talking.

"And to answer the second part of your question, yes, I am still planning on writing about our experiences together on the softball field. And later, when I have more time, I plan to use the video footage I've collected about our experiences to produce a documentary film."

Samira's mom was the first to respond (Negar translated for her),

“Really, you are going to write your thesis about my daughter? And you are really going to make a movie about these girls? That would be so great. No one knows about what our daughters are doing in Iran, especially about the strong, athletic girls like my Samira.”

Samira blushed. Her mom was the only mother joining us for dinner. I looked at Samira and winked because I knew she was embarrassed. Then I looked around the table and said, “Yes, I am still planning on writing my dissertation about our experiences in softball and I hope to make a documentary film about our time together. The truth is, I have really big dreams for both projects.”

Neda jumped back into the conversation, “How big are your dreams, Coach Sarah? You mean like Oprah and Ellen big?”

We all laughed and I thought to myself, “How in the world do they know who Oprah is and, *really*, how do they know about Ellen?”

After I stopped laughing, I answered,

“Well, I’m no Oprah and although a lot of people tell me that I look like Ellen, I’m no Ellen. But I do hope that we can find a way, together, to reach as many people as possible with this research project. I don’t see this so much as my research, as much as I see it as OUR research.”

Everyone smiled and nodded in agreement.

Maryam, the team’s catcher, spoke up next – she hadn’t said a word all afternoon and that was really unusual for her...

“That’s a great idea you have, Neda!”

Everyone laughed.

Maryam continued,

“No, really – listen to me! Maybe we *can* talk to Oprah or Ellen, or maybe Coach Sarah can write about our stories and show our lives in a film. She can send them to Oprah and Ellen and maybe they will both help us tell our stories. Why not? Then, people in America and all over the world can see that we are just like them. Look at Oprah – she became famous and successful because she was strong, independent, and determined. She overcame so many difficulties. She worked hard. She didn’t let any obstacles stand in her way. We are the same as her, actually when I think about it, we are exactly the same. It’s just that we need for other women around the world to hear our stories. If the world could just hear our stories or see our stories, they would know that we are more similar

than we are different. I don't know exactly what they [American women] think about us, but I have heard they don't have good ideas about us. They think we are weak and silent, that we just stay at home all day and do nothing except cook and clean for our husbands. They think we hate Americans. They think we are uneducated and that we can't drive cars. Some even think we still ride camels! It's not true; none of it is true, not for any of us. The truth is we are very active members of our society. We are playing every kind of sport. We are studying at universities. We are driving cars. Our families agree for us to play sports. We want to be friends with everyone...but no one knows any of this about us. Coach Sarah, please, if we continue to help you with your research and if we write a letter to Oprah and Ellen, will you *promise* to tell our stories?

I don't know how to explain it. No one moved and no one spoke. We were paralyzed by

the passion in Maryam's voice, by the resolve in her eyes, and by the strength of her

words. We all sat still, unable to eat or to drink. After what seemed like several

minutes...Negar shifted in her seat. She reached over, grabbed her purse out of the chair

next to her, and pulled out a piece of paper and a pen. Then Negar said,

“What are we waiting for? Sarah has research to do and we need to start writing our letter to Oprah and Ellen.”

After Negar's plea, the players began talking amongst themselves about all the things they wanted to share with Oprah, Ellen, and “the rest of the world” through “*our research project*.” I watched and listened in total amazement. They shared ideas about what they wanted the research project to look like, who they wanted it to reach, and what they hoped to accomplish by doing this research “with” me. The players took ownership of what they wanted to say and how they wanted it to be said. They insisted that it not be just “about” them, but that it included a “real picture” of what *my* role has been as their softball coach since “Day 1” of Iran's softball program. After they completed the handwritten letter, Mitra offered to type it on her computer at work the next day. She also asked permission from everyone to include a photograph so that “people could see for

themselves that Iranian women are really playing softball *and* that American and Iranian women have started to become good friends as a result.”

I was never the same after that day, not as a friend, as a coach, as a woman, as an American, as a researcher, or...as a human being.

As promised, Mitra delivered the letter to my Tehran hotel the following afternoon. The two-page letter was sealed in a large white envelope and was typed in Farsi. I carefully packed it away in my backpack and didn't open it until I returned home the following week.

As Chang (2007) suggested, “Autoethnography can also help transform researchers and readers (listeners) in the process” and although “the transformation of self and others may not always be a goal of autoethnography,” it can be “a powerful by-product of this research inquiry” (pp. 52-53).

From: Hillyer, Sarah J
Sent: Friday, April 3, 2009 3:06pm
To: Committee Members
Subject: Thank you!

Dear Committee,

I am confident that we are making the right decision to “go with” autoethnography and that the outcome will be well worth the noted risks. I look forward to completing the final research project *and* for the opportunity to share about my research experiences as *your* student. I hope that other young researchers and professors can benefit from reading about “our” research journey together. I realize just how fortunate I am to have such a wonderful committee. Each of you bring something very special to the team, but what I appreciate and value the most, is your ability to work well together, your constant encouragement, your patience, your understanding, and your genuine care for me...not just as a student or researcher, but as a whole person. I sincerely appreciate the numerous ways you have invested in my life and will never forget the lessons I have learned from each of you.

Thank you again,
 Sarah

Chapter 6: The Method: Autoethnography

- Text Message 1:* still on for panera today?
- Text Message 2:* yep what time? hear from committee?
- Text Message 1:* 12? good news! cu soon! starving! ☺
- Text Message 2:* great! can't wait – starving too! ;)

Setting the Scene: I packed several books, journal articles, and my laptop in a large white duffle bag and met my friend Juls at Panera for lunch. The goal for our time together was to discuss what we had been learning about autoethnography and to organize an outline of “where I should go next,” now that my committee members had agreed to the methodology.

Juls walks in at 12:20pm

Juls: Sorry I'm late! I had a student in my office that needed help with a paper that is due at 1pm.....*today!*

Sarah: It's ok...it's the story of your new life. Let's order some food!

Juls: Great...I almost ate my steering wheel on the way over.

Sarah (steps up to order): I'll have a “pick-two”... the tuna sandwich, broccoli cheddar soup...and water, please. This is on the same ticket...go ahead Juls, my treat, we're celebrating!

Juls: You sure? Ok...I'm always willing to celebrate if someone needs me! I'll take a “pick-two” also, please. Can I get the smokehouse turkey, broccoli cheddar soup, and a diet coke?

Sarah: Juls, I'm gonna go wash my hands and save us a table...will you grab our food when it comes up? Here's the buzzer thingie and my credit card.

Juls: Got it.

Sarah: Over here (*waving*)...How were your meetings today?

Juls: Whatever, they were fine. Same as always...who cares about that right now? What's the good news?

Sarah: Well.....Dr. D said, in light of everything that has happened over the past few weeks with my visa, the ISF, and IFWS, that my committee is on board with autoethnography! She told me to keep moving forward with my comprehensive exams and that everyone on the committee is excited about my new ideas for an autoethnographic study!

Juls: “So, what did you say to your committee that convinced them to let you use autoethnography?”

Juls doesn't wait for an answer...she keeps rambling with excitement and reaches for my backpack to take out the books and articles I brought with me. She spreads the literature out on the table and gets out her spiral-bound notebook and pen.

Sarah, that's awesome! I'm SO happy for you! It's going to be sooooo good! You have so many great stories to tell! Have you thought about what this means?.. What *personal* contributions you'll be making to our field [sport sociology]?...And to the literature on Muslim women and sports – Iranian women and sports?...Peace and development? Oh my gosh, this is going to be so fun! Do you already know which stories you're gonna tell? Are you gonna talk about Maryam? What about Zahra? You *have* to include them all... Are you gonna start writing tonight? I bet you can't wait to get started!

Sarah: What I *can't* wait for is to *finish* writing! So, if that means getting started equals finishing faster, yes....I'm ready!!!!

Are *you* really this excited for me?

Juls: Are you kidding me? Yes, I'm *really* this excited! How many years have our friends and family been asking you to write a book about your experiences in Iran? Now you *have* to write “a book” in order to graduate! Think about it, not only will you be able to keep your promises to your Iranian friends, you'll be able to write something unique – a piece of research that won't just sit on some shelf or be stored in some electronic archive somewhere. People, I mean *more* than just your committee members, might *actually* read your dissertation! Be honest Sarah, how many people do we know who can *really* say that?

Sarah: I don't know? I think most people *hope* that their work will be widely read...but I see what you're saying. Laurel Richardson (2000) said that most sociological research is not widely read, even by sociologists because so much of what is written is boring and/or poorly written.

Juls: Yeah, wasn't Richardson (2000b) also the one who said,

In social sciences – including sport social sciences – the unexamined fact-oriented, plain prose –style, linear narrative expectation (past theory, literature

review, present hypothesis, methods of test, findings, future research) limit what can be known and what can be told. (p. 7)

Sarah: Yeah, you're right, it was Richardson. I just finished reading her chapter in the Special Edition of the *Sociology of Sport Journal*. Do you remember the term *CAP Ethnography* she used?

Juls: Vaguely, remind me...I think it was something about creative "somethings"....

Sarah: You're close, except "somethings" starts with a "S," not with an "A."

Juls: Funny – keep talking, smartie!

Sarah: Sorry, I couldn't help it – Creative Analytical Practices. Richardson (2000b) said,

"When using creative analytical practices, ethnographers learn about the topic and about themselves that which was unknowable and unimaginable using conventional analytical procedures, metaphors, and writing formats" (p. 10).

This statement really spoke to me, I think for a couple of reasons: (1) As I've read the two exemplar pieces on women's sports in Iran by Hargreaves (2000) and Pfister (2003), I've struggled with the disconnect between what they've written about Iranian sportswomen *and* my own experiences living alongside them, and (2) pouring over these articles has led me to a greater appreciation for creative analytical practices. Without "evocative" writing, I wouldn't really have a space to share about the ways I've been transformed, not only as a researcher and practitioner, but also as a human being (Chang, 2007).

Juls: Yeah, and I think that's so important...if *your* voice is absent from *your* dissertation, then as a reader, I would miss out on so much about what how *you've* *experienced* life with Iranian sportswomen and about the things *you've* *learned* over the past decade working with them. And, if your writing is limited to traditional or conventional standards, you are "handcuffed" by what you can say and how you can say it (Richardson, 2000b). You know what else? You've struggled for so long with the idea of *writing about the "Other."* Autoethnography will allow you the opportunity to present a new way of knowing about a small-scale situation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). It's not like you could write your dissertation from "nowhere" and act like you are "nobody" in the story (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) because the reality is, you are uniquely situated as a researcher/practitioner in this research inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

Sarah: Yeah, I know. Richardson (1994) also said, "...[auto]ethnographers are somewhat relieved of the problems of speaking for the "Other," because they are the Other in their texts" (p. 521). I like this idea a lot more than I like the idea of writing

“about them” or “giving them a voice”....I know this is a very feminist way of thinking about research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), but I can’t let my research project be “a feminist” endeavor. Culturally speaking, feminist theories and movements often carry very negative and oppressive “Western” connotations in Iran...I just can’t go there with this research...it would not be well-received or understood by most of my Iranian counterparts (Naghibi, 2007). Since one of the main objectives is for our research to reach a wide audience, I think this is another very important consideration as I move forward (Richardson, 2000b; Sparkes, 2002).

Juls: That’s interesting...I never really thought about how feminism could be interpreted as an “oppressor” in its own right.

So, I remember from my “Ethnographic Research Methods in Education” class that there were several definitions of autoethnography...do you know which definition(s) you will *apply or claim?*

Sarah: Yes, Richardson’s (2000b) definition of autoethnography....

These are highly personalized, revealing texts in which authors tell stories about their own lived experiences, relating the personal to the cultural. The power of these narratives depends upon their rhetorical staging as ‘true stories,’ stories about events that really happened to the writer. In telling the story, the writer calls upon fiction-writing techniques as dramatic recall, strong imagery, fleshed-out characters, unusual phrasings, puns, subtexts, allusions, the flashback, the flash-forward, tone shifts, synecdoche, dialogue, and interior monologue. (p. 11)

Juls: So, all the things you do best, at least verbally anyway...essentially, autoethnography is telling stories about the ways you’ve experienced life, in your case working and living alongside women softball players in Iran, a place that represents a *completely* different culture. So the writing is....

Sarah: It’s definitely a literary style of writing...Richardson (2000b) pointed out

Through these techniques [dramatic recall, strong imagery, fleshed-out characters, unusual phrasings, etc.], the writer constructs a sequence of events, a ‘plot,’ holding back on interpretation, asking the reader to emotionally ‘relive’ the events with the writer (p. 11).

Juls: Oh yeah...now I remember something else about autoethnography – the role of the reader – have you read any of Carolyn Ellis and Art Bochner’s work yet?

Sarah: Yeah...I love them!!! They seem *so* cute together...am I allowed to say that about two people I’ve never met? I’ve only “known” them through their writings about autoethnography...and it’s not even been that long since I was “introduced” to them.

Juls: Sarah, Sarah, Sarah – *only* you would say that! You better not include this conversation in your dissertation – people will think you’re creepy! You might even get a letter from Carolyn and Art saying, “We don’t know who you are, but you’re creeping us out!”

We both laughed out loud and I made a “creepy” face....

Sarah: Ok, ok – so, back to what you were saying about the role of the reader...I just took notes on what is expected from the reader of autoethnographic texts:

It [autoethnographic research] isn’t meant to be consumed as “knowledge” or received passively...On the whole, autoethnographers don’t want you to sit back as spectators; they want readers to feel, care, and desire” (Bochner & Ellis, 1996, p. 24).

I came up with an analogy for the relationship between the writer and reader of autoethnography...you want to hear it?

Juls: Sarah, *you and your analogies....*I can *hardly* wait to hear this one! It’s not anything like that one you told us about the grasshopper on your windshield, is it?

Sarah: No grasshoppers, promise – but I personally thought that was a really good one! Never mind...you know how my brain works – just bear with me and remember that no analogy or metaphor is perfect (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Here we go....

So, let’s say the author is the pitcher.

Author = Pitcher

And the reader is the catcher.

Reader = Catcher

Juls: Got it.

Sarah: Ok, question: How many softball games have you ever seen where a team runs out of the dugout to take the field, but no one goes to the 1 (pitcher) or 2 (catcher) positions? Never, right? There is *always* a pitcher and a catcher. According to the rules of softball, those two positions *must* be occupied in order for the game to take place. Therefore, we can assume that the pitcher and the catcher are equally as important to the objectives of the sport...and never mind that neither could accomplish the goals of their respective positions without the other.

You with me?

Juls: Yep...think I got it.

Sarah: So, if the pitcher throws the ball, but there is not a catcher to receive the pitch, then the game of softball can't function the way it was designed to be played.

Juls: I'm with you....so, you're saying that in autoethnography, the author of the text and the reader of the text are equally as important and without one another, autoethnography could not accomplish what it was designed to do as a research inquiry. Right?

Sarah: Exactly.

So, we've established that in order for the "game" to be played, the pitcher and the catcher *both* have to be "on the field" at the same time and they both have to be "playing."

Think about this too...

Readers of more conventional forms of qualitative research, for example, scientific or realist tales (Sparkes, 2002) can assume a seat somewhere/anywhere in the stands at the softball game because they are never asked to be anything more than spectators. Therefore, they can distance themselves from the action and although they can still "experience" the game at *some* level, I don't believe they can "experience" the game the same way as someone who has been *invited* to actually play in the game (Ellis & Bochner, 2006).

Juls: I like it!

Sarah: Thanks, but I'm not finished yet....

Juls: Oh, don't worry, I didn't think you were!

Sarah: Something else that the reader of an autoethnographic text should know....by "agreeing" to be "on the field" with the text, they may get dirty, sweaty, or emotionally involved in the game. The reader *might* experience the pain and suffering of defeat, or the crazy excitement of a game-winning run (Ellis & Bochner, 2006).

Juls: Sounds like Sparkes (2002) too,

Here, readers recontextualize what they knew already in light of their encounter with someone else's life. This may not always be a pleasant experience. When an autoethnography strikes a chord in readers, it may change them, and the direction of change cannot be predicted. (p. 97)

I totally get it...but I have a question.

Sarah: What is it?

Juls: Why did you choose to place the reader in the position of the catcher? Why not make the reader another position on the field, like the first-baseman or left-fielder or something? I'm just curious...well, really because I *already know* you have rationalized some kind of logic and I just wanted to hear what you've created in your brain!

Sarah: You know me so well!

So, here's my logic:

One of the most important responsibilities of the catcher is to "call" the game, right? When a batter steps to the plate, the catcher runs through several scripts before signaling to the pitcher which ball to throw (curveball, fastball, screwball, change-up, rise-ball, or drop-ball). Then, the catcher considers the following situations in order to make the "right call,"

1. What inning (early in the game, middle of the game, or end of the game)?
2. Which position is this batter hitting in the line-up (lead-off, clean-up, last batter)?
3. What's the score (are we winning, are we losing, is the game tied)?
4. Is the pitcher hitting her spots (corners, meatballs down the middle of the plate)?
5. What kind of game is the umpire calling (tight strike zone, loose strike zone)?

And possibly other game-related questions as well... you get my point, right?

Juls: Man...I wish we were going to a game *right* now! All this talk about softball makes me want to be outside in the nice, warm sun enjoying the smell of fresh cut grass, popcorn, nachos, hot dogs, and coconut flavored sun-tan lotion!

Sarah: Ahhhh...that would be *so nice!* But unfortunately, we are stuck inside Panera and its freezing rain outside. Depressing, I know!

Juls: Ok, so back to reality and to your analogy about the catcher "calling" the game.... what are you getting at?

Sarah: The reader of an autoethnography is also asked to "call," or judge the quality and/or worth of the text. Therefore, in order for the reader (catcher), to be able to make the "right call," they must be aware of the "situations" in the game (i.e. an appropriate list of criteria). The reader of an autoethnography cannot be expected to "call the right pitch," unless they are aware of the appropriate criteria for judging the quality and worth of an autoethnographic text.

So that's it...that's my analogy. This is how *I've* made sense of what kind of role the reader plays according to what I've learned about autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis, 1996; Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Hopper, et al., 2008).

Juls: I like the way you've made personal connections to the literature, even if some of it only makes sense in *your* own brain. Actually, listening to your metaphor reminds me of something I just proofread in your comprehensive exams...

“Utilizing metaphors in writing narrative inquiry has been used ‘to help them [inquirers] think about their work’ (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 163). While Clandinin and Connelly (2000) warn writers about the hazards of using metaphors, they ‘are convinced that metaphors may have a kind of liberating effect for a writer searching for form’ (p. 163).

Sarah: Impressive memory!

Juls: You have the vision and metaphors. I have the memory and writing skills – that’s what makes us such a good team, remember?

Sarah: How could I forget? I have another idea about judging criteria; can I share it with you?

Juls: Of course.

Sarah: Thanks. First, let me start with Sparkes (2002) who wrote

If alternative forms of qualitative inquiry and new writing practices are judged using inappropriate criteria, there is the danger that they will be dismissed as not being proper research and, therefore, not worthy of attention. (p. 194)

Remember when Dr. Paul said, “And to be honest with you Sarah, I’d *rather you consider another method* [besides autoethnography] as long as you have access to the athletes in Iran again”?

Juls: Yeah, sure do. I also remember how disappointed you were.

Sarah: Well, after reading this week, I think I understand why...I think part of what concerned Dr. Paul so much was the fear (or assumption) that my work would be judged by others in academia using “inappropriate criteria,” thus rendering my research, “not worthy of attention” (Sparkes, 2002, p. 194). Now, I can *really* appreciate how Dr. Paul and my other committee members tried to protect me. So... based on what Sparkes (2002) said and what Dr. Paul inferred, I believe that establishing a *clear set* of criteria for “judging” my work will be vital to the “success” of my research inquiry.

Juls: I totally agree. Have you thought about where you’ll place your methods chapter in the dissertation?

Sarah: Yeah, I've thought about it, but I'm not sure what to do? Do you think my methods chapter should come early – like after the introduction? Or does that seem too weird? I'm afraid if I don't include the criteria for judging an autoethnography early in the text, some readers might be confused or even frustrated. There's nothing like *not* knowing what to expect...

Juls: I agree. I'm trying to put myself in the position of a reader who might experience what you're talking about:

If I pick up a dissertation in Sports Studies, I would expect to find a document with a very linear progression of chapters and evaluative strategies (introduction, review of literature, methods, findings, suggestions for future research; validity, reliability, and generalizability) (Sparkes, 2002).

However, if what I find is a piece of research written in nontraditional prose, my first thought might be, "What is this...? This isn't research, not *good, scientific* research anyway." Furthermore, if I've been asked to read *and* judge the "scientific worth" of this dissertation, I might feel confused or even frustrated. Most likely, I would have no idea where to begin. For example, applying traditional judging standards such as validity, reliability, and generalizability wouldn't seem to work. So, instead of muddling through an unfamiliar style of writing, I would rather take it to someone in the English Literature Department and ask *them* to get back to me as soon as possible. After all, I'm not a literary expert and as a result I would feel completely out of my academic comfort zone. All I could offer from my "judging criteria cellar" is a collection of "old wineskins," but now, as the author of this autoethnographic text, you have asked me to know what to do with "new wine."

Sarah: Good one, Juls! But we don't know anything about wine???

Juls: True, but for some reason that's what came to my mind.

Sarah: Maybe it's an omen...maybe writing a dissertation will drive us to drinking wine!

Laughing together

Sarah: Can I run with your metaphor and bring it back to what we can *really* relate to... milk and cookies? Hang with me...

Let's say we sit down in a bakery and order a plate of freshly baked, warm and gooey, chocolate chip cookies. After consuming a couple, we each decide to order a drink. I order a large coffee with cream and you order a large icy mug of Mayfield skim milk.

The bakery employee brings our drinks to the table and by this time, we've both eaten approximately four cookies (don't worry, they're the little baby ones!).

I pour two creams into my coffee and you tip your icy mug back and down a huge gulp of.....

Grapefruit juice!!!!!!!!!!!!

You spit the grapefruit juice out of your mouth, across the table – all over my brand new white shirt and say,

“Oh my gosh, what is that? It’s disgusting!”

Sarah: “Really, I didn’t notice that you were grossed out....What in the world happened? Is the milk spoiled?”

Juls: “No, I think it was grapefruit juice!”

Sarah (laughing): “Eeeewwwww, disgusting – I thought you ordered milk?”

Juls: “I DID! Mayfield – SKIM MILK!”

Sarah (laughing): “Well, it could have been worse. I thought you *liked* grapefruit juice?”

Juls: “Well, I don’t personally have anything *against* grapefruit juice; it’s just NOT what I was expecting!!!! That was awful!”

Sarah: What do you think?

Juls (laughing): Oh Sarah....this is bordering on one of your *most* outlandish analogies!

Sarah: Let me explain – in this scenario, you are the reader/judger. You picked a research article and expected one thing (icy cold milk = conventional qualitative research in a Sport Sociology Journal), but *got* something totally different (grapefruit juice = an autoethnography). Now, had you actually ordered grapefruit juice, you would have reacted much differently, right? But instead, you were caught off guard and as a result, became “turned off” by the grapefruit juice (disgusting and awful). Much like readers of evocative texts, it is important to know about the product (form, expectation of the reader, judging criteria, and goals/purposes for using an evocative form of writing) you are getting, *before* you consume it. Otherwise, you could be turned off by a different and valuable way of knowing, because you didn’t know what to expect or what was expected of you, a consumer of the autoethnographic text (Sparkes, 2002).

Juls: Ok, I see what you’re saying now about how readers might not only feel confused, frustrated, or out of their academic comfort zones, but they might actually become “turned off” by the writing as well. So what do you think you’ll do about this dilemma?

Sarah: I think I'll either have to place my methods chapter early in the dissertation and/or include a list of criteria to judge the quality of my work in the preface along with the expectations of the writer and the reader of the autoethnography. What do you think?

Juls: I think it's a great idea! So do you know which criteria are most relevant to your research goals?

Sarah: Yes, yesterday I read Sparkes (2002) and he offered "a number of criteria lists that have been put forward in recent years" and encouraged the author to consider "the context of the reading, as well as the purpose of the telling" when selecting criteria for judging different types of evocative writing (p. 211).

I believe Richardson's (2000a) list of criteria most closely reflect my purposes in writing this autoethnography; therefore, I propose that the following list of criteria be used as a guide in judging the quality of my work

- *Substantive contribution:* Does this piece contribute to our *understanding* of social life? Does the writer demonstrate a deeply grounded (if embedded) social scientific perspective? How has this perspective informed the construction of the text?
- *Aesthetic merit:* Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Does the use of creative analytical practices open up the text, invite interpretive response? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfying, complex and not boring?
- *Reflexivity:* Is the author cognizant of the epistemology of postmodernism? How did the author come to write this text? How was the information gathered? Are there ethical issues? How has the author's subjectivity been both a producer and a product of this text? Is there adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgments about the point of view? Does the author hold him- or her-self accountable to the standards of knowing and telling of the people he or she has studied?
- *Impact:* Does this affect me? Emotionally? Intellectually? Does it generate new questions? Move me to write? Move me to try new research practices? Move me to action?
- *Expression of a reality:* Does this text embody a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived experience? Does it seem 'true' – a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the 'real?' (p. 937)

Juls: Perfect, I can totally see how Richardson's (2000a) criteria for judging autoethnography fit your research goals and objectives.

Hey, you forgot to answer my question earlier...how did you “convince” your committee to let you use autoethnography?

Sarah (laughing): I didn’t forget. You just kept talking and never gave me a chance to answer. Anyway, I talked to Dr. D and told her about an article I read titled, “The Dark Side of Truth(s): Ethical dilemmas in researching the personal.”

Juls: Sounds interesting. What was it about?

Sarah: The article was *very* interesting. Clark and Sharf (2007) discussed “potentially harmful consequences of truth encountered by authors in their own research” (p. 399). After offering a few personal examples, they challenged the reader to “anticipate several complex ethical dilemmas,” (p. 399) and to consider the complexities involved in conducting research on sensitive topics or in locations where the researcher’s motives might be misunderstood or misinterpreted.

I know the ideas may not seem especially insightful, but the article made a profound impact on the way I was approaching my research inquiry. As a result, the idea that autoethnography allows the researcher to turn the ethnographic gaze upon herself resonated with me on a different level. Not only would autoethnography allow me to use my interpersonal lens as a way to examine my own “forces” as an American, Christian, woman, coach, researcher, or friend (Chang, 2007), it would also provide an opportunity for me to write in a way that highlights my personal transformation, thus offering a counternarrative. According to Stonebanks (2008), “the counternarrative is used to empower and repair group and individual damaged identities that have derived from the dominant group constructs of identities of certain people through their socially shared narratives or master narratives” (pp. 294-295).

Juls: It totally makes sense to me. Anything else?

Sarah: Yes, then I turned my attention to the ways in which I interpreted *and* applied Chang’s (2007) “three benefits of autoethnography” – remember me telling you about that chapter?

Juls: Yeah I think so, is that the black and green book we ordered from Amazon? Remind me...

Sarah: It *is* the green and black book, sort of small...remember we were super excited because Chang (2007) emphasized a multicultural approach because of her own experiences as a Korean immigrant? So the three benefits are:

- (1) Autoethnography is a method friendly to researchers because the data are the researchers themselves;
- (2) autoethnography enhances cultural understanding of

self and others; and (3) autoethnography can transform researchers and readers in the process....”

Juls: That’s great...perfect since you didn’t get a visa in time to go back to Iran this summer. I don’t remember....Chang (2007) doesn’t write at all about sports does she?

Sarah: No, unfortunately not. She’s a professor in education and anthropology (Chang, 2007).

Juls: Ok, well I was wondering because I am curious about who else in Sport Sociology is using autoethnography, besides Andrew Sparkes?

Sarah: Good question – outside of the Special Edition of the Sociology of Sport Journal, which was published ten years ago (2000), I haven’t really seen that much autoethnographic work published in our discipline. There have been a growing number of pieces since 2000, but according to Sparkes (2002), most “narratives of self in sport and physical activity,” are coming from “a strong Scandinavian influence” that “entails the systematic exploration of personal experiences of sport and body histories” (p. 76).

Juls: Well, aren’t you part Scandinavian? That makes you a natural!

Sarah: Try German, English, and Native Americannice try though!

Back to who is getting autoethnographies published in sport sociology journals....Sparkes (2002) offered a list of “a growing number of scholars in sport and physical activity” who “have drawn on their personal experiences to explore issues relating to body-self relationships over time, identity construction, gender, sexuality, aging, impairment, disability, race, and ethnicity” (p. 76).

Juls: Yeah, now that I think about it, I can’t say I’ve come across very many autoethnographies published in sport sociology journals (Axelsen, 2009; Butryn, 2009; Collinson, 2008; Collinson, 2005; Denison, 2006; Jones, 2009; Purdy, Potrac, & Jones, 2008). And I can’t say I’ve ever seen an autoethnography published about cross-cultural sporting initiatives...specifically for women...in the Middle East. Just think Sarah, your research *might* be the first of many to come???

Sarah (smiling): Stop...you’re gonna give me a big head if you keep talking like that...

Juls: Yeah....right! But you know what, I think we’ve touched on an important point that you’ll need to consider since you’re writing an autoethnography.

Sarah: Oh yeah? What’s that?

Juls: The charges against autoethnography....like the authors are self-indulgent, narcissistic, and self-absorbed – big-headed.

Sarah: I know, I've been really worried about those accusations – that's the last thing I want – for readers to be distracted because they misunderstand the definition of autoethnography, the purposes for autoethnography, and how autoethnography works in several different contexts (Sparkes, 2002). Autoethnographies “can encourage acts of witnessing, empathy, and connection that extends beyond the self of the author and thereby contribute to sociological understanding” (p. 99).

Juls: You'll need to be prepared to defend these accusations *if and when* these claims are made about your autoethnography.

Sarah: Yeah, I know. That's why I've started keeping a research methods journal...

Juls: Sounds great...oh my gosh! Do you know what time it is?

Sarah: Actually, I have *NO* idea! I'm afraid to look....

Juls: It's 2:30! I'm gonna get fired! It was great seeing you and I'm really, really happy for you. I can't wait to talk to you again and see where you are on everything! Get to writing...

Sarah: Thanks! I really appreciate your input and your encouragement! You've convinced me....

Juls: Convinced of you what?

Sarah: You've convinced me that I *can actually* do this...that I *can* write an autoethnography.

Juls: Absolutely, you know what Goodall (2000) said about the “new ethnography?”

Sarah: Well, he said a lot of things, most of which I can't remember...

Juls: “I think you don't choose to do it [ethnography] as much as it chooses *you*” (Goodall, 2000, p. 9). That's how I feel about you and autoethnography. I don't really think *you* chose autoethnography, as much as autoethnography *chose* you!

Sarah: Wow....thanks, Juls. You're the best! Thanks again...just think – if you get fired you'll have more time to work on your comprehensive exams!

Juls: I like the way you're thinking! You're welcome. I'll call you later tonight and see if you've finished writing your methods chapter!

We both laughed and Juls sped away in her new white sports car. I went home and started reading about autoethnography and truth.

Chapter 7: Autoethnography and Truth

A wise professor once asked me, “Sarah, how will you know that your Iranian participants are telling you, a citizen of the West, the truth?”

I thought to myself, “Wow, what a loaded question...where is he going with this?”

He leaned back in his blue high-back chair, crossed his right leg over his left, and folded his hands together under his chin...then; he patiently waited for me to think through the depth of what he was asking.

My mind raced and without giving it too much thought, I blurted,

“Well, I guess I just assume they are telling me the truth. Honestly, I think I am relying on the friendships and trust we have formed on the playing field. I feel like we have developed a mutual trust over the years and I think they feel like they can be honest with me. I have been their friend and coach for six years and they have been my friends and players.”

I smiled...like somehow that would provide more substance to the shallow and naïve answer I just offered. I shifted toward the back of the couch and thought to myself: “Really Sarah, was that the best you could do? Don’t you remember anything from your qualitative methods courses? But what else could you say on the spot...he asked such a loaded question. If you just had more time to think about it...”

Dr. Paul: Uh hmmm ...you’ve been their coach and they’ve been your players. I’m sure some trust has developed and I’m also sure you are aware of the power dynamics involved in coach-player; researcher-researched relationships (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Let’s move on to another question if that’s ok with you.

How might your participants respond differently to you as their “coach” versus “researcher?”

INTERIOR MONOLOGUE:

What did he just say? Think Sarah, think! Here’s a chance to redeem yourself.

I was their friend first, then their coach, and only recently have I been a “researcher.”

Wait a minute...

my Iranian friends are the ones who really encouraged me to “try for a PhD.”

They understand this new role.

I don’t think they see me as a researcher.

Well maybe they do...

perhaps when I have a tape recorder or video recorder in front of us?
 I can't be certain about anything –
 I can't read their minds,
 they're not under oath when they talk to me (Atkinson, 2007)
 I don't know the cultural perceptions or expectations
 when it comes to "formal interviews."
 What if they don't feel safe (Clark & Sharf, 2007)?
 What if they have been socialized to *provide only certain* answers...
Maybe this isn't about trust at all?
 I hope they don't see me as a "researcher."
 I would prefer if they still consider me their long-time friend,
 a good friend who is a self-appointed "ambassador for Iranian sportswomen."
 Nothing has changed since I first met them and
 came back to school for a doctoral degree.
 I still want to share their stories. Our stories.
 Being a "researcher" is good, even better right?
 It's another platform to share about our experiences...

My professor interrupted my thoughts...

Dr. Paul: Maybe you need some more time to think about that question also?

He grinned and I tried to bury myself further into the couch.

Sarah: I'm sorry. Yes, I think I do need some more time to think about it.

Dr. Paul: Ok, fair enough. Can I ask you another question since we're on a roll?

Sarah: On a roll? You're kidding, right!?! The only place I'm rolling is off the edge of steep, steep cliff!"

Dr. Paul smiling: Isn't that what doing qualitative research is all about?

Let's continue... have you thought about the possibility of your participant's "truth" differing from your own "truth?" What if you experience a truth different from theirs, whose truth will you privilege?

Sarah: Well, I see my research inquiry as a postmodern project and "the word *truth* arouses suspicion in postmodern times, as well it should" (Frank, 2004).

INTERIOR MONOLOGUE:

Not much better Sarah, but at least you could quote *one* person about your epistemological beliefs as they relate to truth.

Dr. Paul: Ok great, I see where you're going with that answer and it sounds like you have a handle on where you will begin in the literature.

Sarah: Yes sir...

Dr. Paul: Ok, now we are getting somewhere. You up for one more question?

Sarah: I think so...guess we'll find out!

Dr. Paul: Are you still planning to use the audio and videotaped interviews you have collected? And what about the photographs, field notes, journal entries, newspaper clippings, etc?

Sarah: Yes, sir.

Dr. Paul: It's really great that you have collected so much data already and that your data sources are so varied, but my question is this: How will you reconcile potential conflicting truths, as well as establish confidence in the findings? And, does technology privilege some truths over other truths?

Sarah: Dr. Paul, *to tell you the truth*...I have no idea! But this is exactly why I loved your qualitative methods class and precisely why I asked you to be on my dissertation committee. You have a way of pushing me, challenging me, stretching me...I love how you always find a way to get the best out of me, even when I don't want you to.

Dr. Paul smiled back at me...

Dr. Paul: Well, I'm glad you can appreciate my motives, some students might take me too seriously. I want you to give some thought to my questions...in fact, if you agree, why don't I email a cleaned up version of these questions to your committee chairperson and ask her if we can move forward with your comprehensive exam question from me?

Sarah: Perfect. I love that idea. I can't say I'm necessarily excited about answering your questions, but I know they are important for my research. Let's go for it!

The remainder of this chapter is devoted to a series of hypothetical situations I created as a means to answer Dr. Paul's questions regarding truth, narrative, and autoethnography.

Situational Truths

What if you posed the question, “*So tell me, what was it like traveling to Iran?*” My reply might be, “*How much time do you have?*” Based upon your response, I would conduct a quick mental scan of stored memories devoted to a plethora of experiences in Iran. The process of sweeping across my recollections might include skipping over some storied accounts because they seem inappropriate for the *context* of our discussion. Or, I may consider other stories depending on *who* you are or *why* I perceive you are interested in knowing. Finally, I would reach a decision and share a story or series of stories based upon *my* interpretation of what *you* were really hoping to learn or gain by inquiring in the first place.

In order to demonstrate how I interpret the textured layers of *truth* in relation to storytelling and personal narratives (autoethnography), I wish to play upon the question, “*So tell me, what was it like traveling to Iran?*” This question has been posed on multiple occasions from a wide-variety of inquirers (i.e., male, female, American, Iranian, professor, student, athlete, etc). In forming my responses, I engage in the same decision-making process each time: (1) scan my memories (2) evaluate the context (3) consider who is asking (4) speculate why she/he is asking and (5) interpret his/her motive. Not surprisingly, I might decide to share different stories depending upon my assumptions.

As a means to explicate the messy, complex, and tentative nature of telling one’s own stories, I have created three different life-like scenarios, each posing the same question, “*So tell me, what was it like traveling to Iran?*” Within each of the following scenarios, I offer the reader an inside look into how I *might* answer the same question for

three different audiences. Furthermore, the tentative nature of my *hypothetical responses* (“might”, “perhaps”, “maybe”, “or”, etc) invites readers to consider the complexities, layers, and cognitions involved during any decision-making process.

The characters I chose for the three hypothetical situations included an Iranian woman, an American male undergraduate student, and a diverse audience attending “Persian Culture Night” at the International House on campus.

Scenario one: Zahra.

Setting the scene: Zahra and I met just over a year ago. I was walking up the hill on my way to the library when a young, “Middle-Eastern-looking” woman, dressed in a beautiful pink hijab, approached me and asked, “Excuse me, do you know where the International Student Services building is located?”

Sarah: Yeah, I’m pretty sure it’s near the library. I’m heading that direction; maybe we can find it together?

Zahra: Oh great, but please, don’t let me trouble you. You can just tell me where you think it is and I’ll try to find it.

Sarah: It’s no trouble, I’m happy to help.

We made our way up the hill toward the library.

Sarah: Do you mind me asking where you are from?

Zahra: No, I don’t mind...Nashville.

Sarah: Oh really? How long have you lived in Nashville?

INTERIOR MONOLOGUE:

You asked for that one, Sarah. Of *course* she’s from Nashville. You can’t just assume because she’s wearing hijab that she’s “from” an Islamic country. I hope I didn’t offend her by asking...but her accent, I know her accent and I bet anything she is from Iran. Her hijab isn’t necessarily “Iranian” though...maybe she’s from Jordan, or Palestine...no, it’s

Iran – I’m sure of it. I should tell her why I’m asking so she doesn’t feel awkward or on the defense. After 9/11, a lot of Muslims I’ve met have been hesitant to share that kind of information. I wish it weren’t that way...

Zahra: About seven years now. Where are you from?

Sarah: Kentucky.

Zahra: I hear it’s beautiful there.

Sarah: Yeah, I think it is, but I don’t think it’s too different from Knoxville, except Kentucky is famous for its horse farms and Knoxville has the Smoky Mountains.

Zahra: This may sound like a stupid question, but is the grass in Kentucky really blue?

Sarah: It’s not a stupid question. A lot of people ask..., but the truth is, the grass isn’t literally blue. Do you mind if I ask you a question?

Zahra: Sure, go ahead...

Sarah: Are you Iranian by any chance? Please excuse me if the question is too personal...

Zahra (looking surprised): Yes, I am. And no, your question wasn’t too personal. But, I’m curious, how did you know?

Sarah: I don’t know...it was just a hunch.

Zahra: Really? That’s impressive! Do you know a lot of Iranians or are you just a really lucky guesser?

Sarah: Well, both I guess. I’ve been to Iran a few times so I’ve picked up on some of the mannerisms and accents...maybe that’s what tipped me off?

Zahra: I can’t believe it...why did you go there? Do you have family in Iran? How many times have you been? What do you think of Iran? When are you going back? Did you like Iran?

This was the beginning of our friendship.

Hypothetical Question: “*So Sarah, tell me, what was it like traveling to Iran?*”

For Zahra, I would undoubtedly include stories about warm hospitality, beautiful and historic landmarks, delicious foods, ornate handicrafts, and intricate Persian carpets. I might tell stories about enjoying live music while eating at traditional restaurants with local friends. I would probably include some stories about the times I visited the magnificent shrine in the holy city of Mashad; or the ancient ruins of Persepolis (Shiraz); or the breathtaking Alborz Mountains; or the tombs of infamous poets.

Scenario two: Robert.

Setting the scene: Robert is an undergraduate student from East Tennessee who is one semester away from graduating with a degree in Sports Management. He has never traveled outside the country. He was born in Knoxville, attended school in Knoxville, and has only traveled as far as Florida on a few spring breaks trips with his fraternity brothers. Robert is one of thirty-six students in a special topics course I designed called, “Women in Sports: A Global Perspective.”

Robert: So tell me [us], what was it like traveling to Iran?

In order to capture the students’ attention, I might recount “scary” moments as an American in the wrong place at the wrong time. Perhaps I would share about the time I was confronted by the police for taking photographs outside the former United States Embassy. Maybe I would tell them about the time I suggested we visit a nearby nuclear facility in response to a MSNBC press release that stated: “After an order by the president...foreign tourists can visit Iran’s nuclear facilities.” The issue was ordered to “show that Iran’s nuclear program [was peaceful], [with] aims to generate fuel, not weapons” (MSNBC.com news services, 2006). Lastly, I might tell them about the time I

accidentally said the word “spy” on the phone in reference to a recent movie I had seen. The next day I traveled to a different city for another softball camp and after leaving the airport with my host was pursued in a high-speed car chase. Once we safely arrived at my hotel, the police immediately questioned my hosts. Thankfully, they explained my innocent mistake, apologized for the misunderstanding, and no further action was taken.

Scenario three: “Persian Culture Night.”

Setting the scene: Zahra and Robert attended “Persian Culture Night” hosted at the UT International House (I-House). As president of the *Persian Club*, my Iranian friend Zahra was responsible for organizing the event, which included traditional Persian food, a short presentation, and Persian dance lessons. The I-House kindly invited me to give a short presentation “*about traveling to Iran.*”

Question from the audience: So, please tell us, what was it like traveling to Iran?

It was an honor to take the podium. I scanned the crowd and found Zahra leaning against the doorframe in the back of the room. She smiled at me with a “go-ahead” gesture. I tapped on the microphone to make sure it was working. After thanking Zahra, the I-House, and everyone in attendance, I announced what a privilege it was to speak as a “self-appointed, ambassador for Iranian sportswomen.” I smiled and the audience stared at me with incredibly blank faces...perhaps they were confused to see a white, athletic-looking American girl take the podium on Persian Culture Night? Perhaps...

My eyes left Zahra’s and searched for additional familiar faces. I located Robert sitting in the back left-hand corner of the room with some of his fraternity brothers. I remembered our previous conversations about Iran and reflected upon the *different*

stories I had shared between Zahra and Robert. Next, I took notice of the diverse faces sitting in front of me and recalled experiences most relevant for the purposes of this evening. Tonight, *unlike* sharing with a single listener/reader, I had to consider a *group of people* which always poses a more layered set of considerations, but still includes: (1) scanning my memories; (2) evaluating the context; (3) considering who is asking; (4) speculating why he/she is asking; and (5) interpreting his/her motives. Rather than trying to contextualize a story or series of stories based upon a single listener/reader, I had to consider multiple audiences and reach a final decision based ultimately upon *my own* expertise and interpretations, while still honoring the people *in* my stories, as well as the people listening *to* my stories.

Weeks before the presentation, I began preparing for the event. I took into account my previous experiences at “Culture Nights” and expected a diverse audience. I assumed that everyone present, either by her/his own volition *or* by someone else’s (i.e. a girlfriend, boyfriend, professor.... Necessary extra credit), attended “Culture Night” at the I-House to learn something about different cultures. Therefore, I purposely constructed my presentation around “culture,” specifically, *how* I have experienced the Iranian culture, *what* I have learned about the Iranian culture, and *why* I have grown to love many aspects of the Iranian culture.

I also decided to create a short montage of photos, video-footage, and music. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) define montage as a series of images assembled in a way that creates urgency: “Montage invites viewers to construct interpretations that build on one another as the scene unfolds. These interpretations are built on associations based on the

contrasting images that blend into one another” (p. 5). Use of visual representations in this way “creates and brings psychological and emotional unity to an interpretive experience” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 5). Adding a visual layer to the verbal stories was my way of including an emotional element to the situation – an American female teaching softball (an “American” sport) to Iranian women.

Truth or truthS

Now that each of the hypothetical situations has been introduced, I wish to shift the reader’s attention back to my professor’s questions concerning truth, narrative, and autoethnography.

Dr. Paul’s question – Part I

The assumption that other people tell the truth is necessary for the conduct of everyday life. But what constitutes “truth” and to whom we owe the truth varies among cultures. How will you know that your interview participants are, in fact, telling you, a member of the Western culture, the truth? How do you anticipate that their response to you as “researcher” will be different from their response to you as “coach?”

In autoethnography, as well as other forms of narrative inquiry, researchers “recognize that storytellers select components of the stories they tell (reconstruct) in order to convey the meaning they intend the listener to take from the story” (Bailey & Tilley, 2002, p. 575). While I collected various forms of data in Iran, I was never searching for “a historical truth of an individual’s account of an event,” but rather for “the meaning portrayed in story form” (Bailey & Tilley, 2002, p. 581). Moreover, “storytellers reconstruct their stories to convey a specific perspective of an event. It is meaning, not truth, that is conveyed in the form of stories. It is the Truth of their

experiences, not an objective, decontextualized truth” (Bailey & Tilley, 2002, p. 581). Consequently, I assumed my co-participants’ stories were based not only upon my role as “Westerner,” “Researcher,” or “Coach,” but also upon the place, time, and/or other contextual factors. Likewise, the stories I shared with Zahra and Robert were reconstructed stories based upon several contextual considerations.

Zahra and Robert

In order to elucidate a storytellers’ “selection process” (Bailey & Tilley, 2002; Frank, 2004), I would like to revisit the stories I shared with Zahra and Robert and apply them to Bailey and Tilley’s (2002) idea of contextualized truth. With Zahra, I shared stories about warm hospitality, beautiful and historic landmarks, delicious foods, ornate handicrafts, intricate Persian carpets, live music, traditional restaurants, and visits to holy shrines, ancient ruins, breathtaking mountains, and tombs of infamous poets. With Robert, I shared stories about being at the wrong place at the wrong time, meeting police outside the former American Embassy, requesting a tour of a nearby nuclear facility, and being questioned by the police for carelessly using the word “spy” on the telephone.

My decision to share different stories with Zahra and Robert was not objective, nor was it decontextualized. I purposely considered that Zahra was Iranian and that I had only known her for a short time. I also acted upon what I have learned about the Iranian culture over the past ten years. For example, Iran is sometimes referred to as the “most hospitable culture in the Middle East.” Therefore, I told Zahra stories that reaffirmed her culture’s reputation for unmatched hospitality. Iranian people also take great pride in

their Persian heritage – literature, handicrafts, carpets, poets, foods, and holy shrines. Hence, I shared stories about friends who have taken me for shopping, for sightseeing, and for eating. I carefully selected the stories I shared with Zahra and told of experiences that I knew would be *meaningful for her* as the listener.

On the other hand, I purposely shared stories with Robert and his classmates that included uncertain and scary moments. I told stories about meeting the police after taking pictures outside the American Embassy; asking to visit a nuclear facility per the media-released “invite” from the Iranian president; and being questioned by the police because I accidentally used the word “spy” on the telephone. As a teacher, I have learned the importance of grabbing the students’ attention early, especially when the “lecture” includes places or persons they know little about. In order to do so, I often tell dramatic stories that capture their imaginations and draw them into a world they’ve probably never been before.

The meanings I wanted Zahra to acquire from my stories were radically different than the “attention-grabbers” I intended for Robert and his classmates. As the storyteller, I selected components of the stories in order to convey the meaning I intended the listeners to take from the story (Bailey & Tilley, 2002). Additionally, I reconstructed my stories to convey a specific perspective of an event and it was the meaning, not a whole truth that was conveyed in the form of stories. It was the “Truth of my experiences, not an objective, decontextualized truth” (Bailey & Tilley, p.581, 2002). In other words, I carefully selected certain components of my experiences as an American to be shared with Zahra. The accounts for Robert represented stories I would have *never* considered

sharing with Zahra, especially so early in our friendship. Yet, *both* sets of stories I shared with Zahra and Robert were “truthful” representations of my experiences “*traveling to Iran.*”

Dr. Paul’s question – Part II

Among your data gathering techniques are observation, photographic documentation, interviewing with audio recording, and video recording. The assumption of triangulation is that if diverse data types point to a similar finding then the researcher can have greater confidence in the finding. However, data sources themselves have cultural biases. What one is willing to say “on camera” may be different from what one is willing to say “on tape,” which may be different from what one would “show” in a photograph. What precautions can you take to assure that you properly read the evidence contained in audio recordings, video tape recordings, and still photography. Do they all reveal the same truth or do they in fact reveal different and sometimes conflicting truths? Does the technology privilege some truths?

In order to take up the use of diverse data types, confidence in the findings, and the possibility of conflicting truths, I would like to turn your attention to the third life-like scenario, Persian Culture Night at the International House.

When my friend Zahra asked me to give a short presentation during Persian Culture Night, I gladly accepted her invitation. Since 2001, I have never turned down an opportunity to speak on behalf of my Iranian friends and fellow sportswomen. As I prepared to give the presentation, I (1) scanned my memories (2) evaluated the context (purposes of the event, the time allotted for the presentation, the layout of the room, the availability to effectively use multi-media, etc) (3) considered who was asking (likely to be a diverse audience based on my previous experiences at the I-House...) (4) speculated why he/she was asking (interested in learning something about another culture...) and (5) interpreted his/her motive (attended by choice, attended by coercion, curious about what

Iran is “*really*” like, etc). After much deliberation, I decided upon a few short stories and considered answers to possible questions about my experiences in Iran.

Next, I began to sift through scores of photographs, and hours of video footage in order to locate the best images to visually support the stories I selected (Johnson, 2004). Almost immediately, the number of still and moving images that diametrically “opposed” the verbal stories I decided to share overwhelmed me. Contrary to my original goals for including a visual element, I realized that the conflicting verbal stories and visual images would allow me to include additional layers of meaning to the presentation (Bach, 2007). The competing versions of stories more accurately represented the multi-layered and complex nature of my experiences in Iran. Moreover, the intention to locate and include photographs and video images to “reinforce the truthful nature of the verbal tales” would have constrained any “critical reflexivity,” thus discouraging any view from differing directions (Johnson, 2004). Consequently, by telling the same story (“*what was it like traveling to Iran?*”) from different points of view (verbal stories, digital photography, and movie images), “readers and audiences [were] then invited to explore competing versions of the context, to be immersed in, and merge with new realities to comprehend” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 6).

According to Bach (2007), “Visual narrative inquiry is an intentional, reflective, active human process in which researchers and participants explore and make meaning of experience both visually and narratively” (p. 281). Over the course of the past decade, I have utilized photography and videography as one of the ways to capture my coaching adventures in Iran. The decision to record still and moving images of my experiences

living alongside Iranian sportswomen stemmed from a personal desire to document our journey together. I am not a professionally trained photographer or videographer.

However, I have made very deliberate choices about which images were captured, as well as how, when, where, and why certain images were selected. The process of looking back through a decade of still and moving visual images has shed light on my own cultural transformation as a coach and as a researcher (Chang, 2007).

The archived photographs and video footage provided “a way of portraying the particularities of an autobiographical narrative point of view [where] in any story told, multiple selves speak, and these selves are temporal productions residing in both the present and a reconstructed past” (Bach, 2007, p. 285). Hence, I have contributed additional layers to my autoethnographic study by including multiple narratives through verbal *and* visual representations. Moreover, by including multiple and sometimes conflicting voices, I have disrupted a single and authoritative *truth* of my experiences in Iran by providing a “deepened, complex, thoroughly partial understanding of the topic” (Richardson, 2000b, pp. 13-14). Visual and verbal representations are not hierarchal, but complimentary to understanding the complexities and nuances of the Iranian society. My goal is not to privilege one over the other or to even reconcile the two, as that would be too simplistic and monolithic. However, it is my goal to affirm Richardson’s ideas regarding crystallization that allow for competing visual and verbal representations of experience to reflect different versions of the same reality (Richardson, 2000b).

Dr. Paul’s question – Part III

Assume that you determine your participants are in fact telling you the truth, as they understand it. Assume that you, however, come to understand a different truth. How

will you reconcile your participants' truth with your truth? Whose truth will you privilege?

As I write an autoethnography, it will be important to note that I am most interested in the *meanings* of stories, rather than determining “whether one account more accurately reflects the truth” (Bailey & Tilley, 2002, p. 579). In qualitative research, as in everyday life, there is an assumption that participants and researchers are telling the truth. However, “a personal narrative is not meant to be read as an exact record of everything or even what actually happened in a person’s life” (Riessman, 1993, p. 64). Furthermore, “historical truth is not the main issue in narrative. What matters is if the life story is deemed trustworthy, more than ‘true.’ We are after all seeking a subjective reality” (Atkinson, 2007, p. 239).

Autoethnography privileges story and meaning over any assertion to truth and therefore eliminates the necessity to *privilege* any one person’s truth *over* another person’s truth (Bailey & Tilley, 2002). In fact, autoethnography “foregrounds multiple perspectives, that *include* participants’ voice and interpretations” (Ellis, 2004, p. 30, italics not in original). Take for example, a portion of one story I shared at Persian Culture Night about introducing softball in Iran for the very first time.

Freedom or Claustrophobia? Tehran, February 2000

Nearly thirty-five women, all eager to learn a new sport, were waiting for me inside a gymnasium at the Azadi Sports Complex in Tehran. To say “new” sport, I am possibly understating the significance of the word “*new*.” The term “new” in this context means the players had *never* seen the game of softball on television, in a movie, or on the

Internet; they had *never* touched a softball, a glove, or a bat. They had *no* idea of the objectives, what the ball was used for, what function the bat served, which hand to put the glove on, or what the game looked like when played. My work was cut out for me. There was no field to play on; we used basketball courts, tennis courts, and soccer fields. I did not speak Farsi, most of the Iranian did not speak English, and the translator had no words to draw upon to communicate the concepts, rules, strategies or techniques of a game that had never been played in the history of Farsi-speaking people.

When we arrived at the gym, Ali (a driver from the Softball Federation) and I unloaded several crates of donated softball equipment. The International Softball Federation, through its “Used Equipment Donor Program,” provided enough start-up kits to supply the first six Iranian women’s softball teams with everything they needed. *As soon as* we unloaded the van and carried everything to the front door of the gymnasium, Ali politely bowed and said, “Khodahafez” (Good-bye). He climbed back into the late-1970s silver mini-van and sped away. I stood at the front door, hoping that Ali didn’t prematurely drop me off at the wrong location. I turned my attention to finding a way to get inside the gym so I wouldn’t be late for Tehran’s first women’s softball class.

I grabbed the handle to the large metal door, pushed and pulled as hard as I could, but the door was securely *and* obviously locked. I knocked, but no one answered. Unsure of what to do next, I decided to walk around the building and try every single entry. Unfortunately, they were all locked and no one answered when I pounded on the doors. I walked back around to the front of the gym and noticed a tan box mounted on the

brick wall, to the right-hand side of the door. “Great,” I thought to myself, “maybe someone will answer me now....”

I started pushing buttons. Then I heard,
 “Salam.” (Hello)

Sarah: Salam, khoobi? (Hello, how are you?)

Something in Farsi...I couldn't understand her.

Sarah (in slowly enunciated English): Thank you, I am here to teach the women's softball class today. Can I please come inside?

Something else in Farsi...I still didn't understand.

Sarah (more loudly and slower) Softball? Coach? Teach?

Woman? American? Invited? Softball? Please?

Thank you?

Click – loud bang – loud click – another loud bang...

A woman dressed in a black chador cracked open the door and peeked outside. I leaned in toward the small opening and smiled at her. Then, I held up a bright yellow softball.

Sarah: Hello, Miss. My name is Sarah and I am the coach from America. I am here to teach softball today.

Someone else came to the door. The lady in the black chador motioned for me to wait... I could hear two women speaking, but I had no idea what they were saying. Then, a young university-age woman stuck her head outside the door, smiled, and said,

Hello Coach Sarah, welcome to Iran! My name is Samira. Are you alone? Where is your driver?

Sarah: Nice to meet you Samira. Yes, I am alone. Ali from the Federation left already. Why? Is everything ok?

Samira: Yes, of course everything is ok, Coach Sarah. It's just that the salon manager is concerned because right now it is "women's-only" hours. No men are allowed inside because all of the players have already taken off their hijab. Are you sure you're alone?

Sarah: "Oh, ok. Yes, I am sure I am alone."

Samira: Welcome to "EE-Ron," please, come inside. Coach Sarah, we have been waiting for you all morning! We are too excited! I have been here since very early today because I didn't want to be late. You know...this is the happiest day of my life?

Sarah: "Really? I'm so happy to be here with you all! Excuse me for a second though, do you mind asking some of the players to help us carry this equipment into the gym?"

I point outside to the six large crates that Ali and I left on the front step...

Samira sticks her head out the door and sees the equipment boxes. She quickly disappears through the corridor but I can hear her screaming with excitement as she runs away to recruit some help. Several young women come barreling around the corner...they are scrambling to put on their scarves and jackets as they sprint in my direction.

Softball players: Miss Sarah, Coach Sarah, please, please, how can we help you?

Welcome to "EE-Ron."

Sarah: Thank you. It's *so* good to be in Iran again! If you don't mind, we just need to get these boxes inside for our training. Please be careful, they are *very, very* heavy.

Softball players: Ok, we are happy to help. Thank you *so* much for these equipments. Have they told you at the Softball Federation (SF) that we don't have *any* equipment here for learning softball? The SF said we might have to use tennis balls and tennis racquets at this camp... some of us even brought old badminton birdies with us today just in case we needed them. Don't worry, Coach Sarah, we will take these boxes inside for you, please Miss, take a rest. Would you like us to get you some hot tea?

Sarah: No thank you, I'm good. Samira, do you mind grabbing the other end of this crate and we'll carry it in together? Be careful, it's really heavy!

*Once we carried all the crates inside, the female gym manager immediately closed the door behind us and securely fastened two heavy locks attached to the large metal door. From exactly 9:00am – 3:00pm, every man was **locked out** and every woman who had come to learn softball was **locked in**. We had the gym all to ourselves for six whole hours!*

Privileging Truth

According to Ellis and Bochner (2006), the goal of autoethnography

is to open up conversations about how people live, rather than close down with a definitive description and analytic statements about the world as is 'truly' exists outside the contingencies of language and culture. I believe the conversational

style of communicating has more potential to transform and change the world for the better. As a multivoiced form, conversation offers the possibility of opening hearts and increasing our understanding of difference. (p. 435)

As the author of this text and/or storyteller, I am faced with several options. Do I present my own interpretations? Offer theoretical findings? Assert an authoritative interpretation about my first experience as a softball coach in Tehran by highlighting gender segregation, mandatory veiling, and the social constructions of women's bodies (Hargreaves, 2000; Pfister, 2003)? Or should I choose to silence my own voice and simply offer a report on *exactly what* the softball participants said about attending the first women's softball class in Tehran? Or do I combine my knowledge and observation with the words of the softball participants to produce a multi-voiced, interpretive text in which the reader can formulate their own truths? Whose truth do I privilege?

The beauty of autoethnography is that it allows for the privileging of multiple experiences or "truths". Including the complexities associated with female sport participation in Iran provides a more holistic version of the "truth." My voice coupled with the voices of the participants allows for Richardson's (2000b) concept of crystallization to be fulfilled. As light is reflected off of a crystal – in this instance, women's only hours in a locked gymnasium – different images are projected. When looking at a crystal, the viewing angle determines perception. A locked gymnasium door made me feel claustrophobic and limited, but to the Iranian women of the softball camp, a locked door symbolized freedom – the freedom to learn something new together, to be physically active, and the freedom to just *play*, as sisters, as friends. Autoethnography

foregrounds both the voice of the participants as well as the author in order to highlight emotional connections and to provide another layer of richness for the reader of the text (Ellis, 2004). In this way, autoethnography allows for the nuances associated with female sport participation to be understood outside of the dominant discourse of Western ideology and to be viewed through many lenses, allowing the reader to make meaningful personal connections and to leave the research text with a deepened appreciation for the complexities of life (Frank, 2004).

Chapter 8: A Brief History of Women's Sports in Iran

The following chapter is a composite re-creation of several lectures and PowerPoint presentations I have given about the history of women's sports in Iran over the past few years. In response to Richardson's (2005) suggestion to experiment with different forms of "writing as a method of knowing" (p. 975), I will use the following format as a mode of experimental representation: (1) PowerPoint slides which include references to current literature devoted to the history of women's sports in Iran, (2) questions from audience members which either represent "real" questions I have fielded during "real" presentations *or* that represent "imagined" questions I have created as a way to explore an issue more deeply, to expand upon a topic from personal experiences, or to "transition" the audience into the next PowerPoint slide.

This composite re-creation demonstrates my attempt and "desire to 'converse' with the literature rather than just to interject my perspectives into identified gaps in literature" (Wall, 2008, p. 40). Chang (2007) encouraged writers of evocative texts to realize that

Your creativity is the only limit to this type of experimental autoethnography. It opens up creative possibilities to you and imaginative participation to readers.

You can express your story in less structured and inhibited formats; readers can be actively engaged in interpreting your creative expressions. (p. 148)

I invite the reader to become an active part of the audience by reading along with the PowerPoint slides, by asking your own questions about the text, and by "listening" to and

“conversing” with other “audience members” as “they” interact with me throughout this “presentation.”



Early History of Sports in Iran

- 1851 – Regular exercises in schools
- 1916 – Physical Education official school curriculum
- 1947 – Iran National Olympic Committee formed
- 1948 – Men competed in 1948 Olympic Games held in London; no women

Notes:

Although not well documented, Western sport in Iran dates back to 1851 when European officers required students of the first modern school to perform regular exercises. However, it was not until sixty-five years later, in 1916, that physical education became a part of the official school curriculum (Chehabi, 2006). In 1947, the Iran National Olympic Committee was formed and in 1948 men competed in their first-ever Olympic Games held in London (Chehabi, 2006).

Women's Sports in Iran

- 1964 – Iran sent women and men to Tokyo Olympic Games
- 1964 - 4 women competed in gymnastics and track & field
- 1974 – Women competed in the Asian Games hosted in Tehran
- 1974 – Women's fencing team won first-ever gold medal for women

1976 – 1996

- 1976 – Women's fencing team competed in the Montreal Olympic Games: no medal earned
- 1996 – Lida Fariman, target shooter, competed in the Atlanta Olympic Games



Notes:

Sixteen years later, Iran sent a delegation of male and female athletes to the 1964 Tokyo Olympics. Four Iranian women competed, representing gymnastics and track and field (Chehabi, 2006; Pfister, 2003). Ten years later, Iranian women competed again, but this time in the 1974 Asian Games. The Asian Games were hosted in Tehran and the women's fencing team won the country's first-ever international gold medal for women (Pfister, 2003).

Notes:

The women's success during the 1974 Games marked a significant feat in the history of Iranian women's sports; no other female athlete from Iran would medal again until pistol shooters took the podium at the 2004 Sydney Olympic Games (Bannayan, 2008). As a result of the Asian Games success, the 1974 women's fencing team competed in the 1976 Olympic Games held in Montreal. Unfortunately, the team failed to earn any medals. Following the Games in 1976, Iran did not send another female athlete to participate in the Olympics until Lida Fariman, target shooter, competed in the 1996 Atlanta Games (Pfister, 2003; Sfeir, 1985).

Audience: So, it looks like Iranian women didn't compete in the Olympics from 1976 until 1996. That's twenty years. Why? What was the context at this time?

1970s in Iran

- Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi
- Aggressive Westernization
- Women's sport integral to modernization
- Mixed-gender participation excluded many women

Notes:

The 1970s in Iran represented an aggressive Westernization period and the Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi viewed women's participation in sport as an integral part of modernization (Sfeir, 1985). However, "participation in sports was available only to women who did not mind training with men, and therefore excluded many devout Muslim women" (Andoni, 1995).

Sport and Politics

- Middle-class and university-educated women enjoyed sports and exercise
- Shah – Western imperialism and censured for neglecting needs of the majority of Iranian people
- Sport never touched the lives of most Iranian women
- Sportswomen – some decried as decadent

Notes:

"Many middle-class and university-educated women adopted Western dress and enjoyed sports and exercise. But under the developing capitalist system the Shah was seen as a symbol of the tyranny of Western imperialism and censured for neglecting the needs of the majority of Iranian people...Sport therefore never touched the lives of most Iranian women, and in traditional communities Western-style sportswomen were decried as decadent" (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 54).

Sports Participation Rates

- 1973-1974: Estimated that only 120,000 women competed in 13 sport activities
- 1973-1974: Population of Iran almost 34 million

Notes:

Despite the Shah's efforts to encourage women to play sports, most women did not participate during this decade. For example, in 1973-1974 only 120,000 women in a country of almost 34 million people (Amirtash, 2005) competed in 13 sport activities (Keddie, 2003; Sfeir, 1985).

Audience: Ok, I think I understand. It sounds like women's sports participation in Iran during the 1970s was largely influenced by sociological factors such as religious devotion, socioeconomic status, and/or political ideology. My question is – what affect did the 1979 Islamic Revolution have on women's sports?

Response: First, please allow me to address your assessment of women's sports during this time period. According to the cited literature, you're right on (Hargreaves, 2000; Keddie, 2003; Sfeir, 1985). However, *I am personally* hesitant to make such large claims of cause and effect. I do accept that religious, socioeconomic, and political factors, as cited in the literature, *played a role* in *some* women's decisions to participate or not to participate in sports; however, I don't accept these historical reconstructions as *the only* truth (Booth, 2005) regarding women's sports in Iran during this decade. For example, family expectations, access to sporting facilities, social norms and expectations could also be contributing factors. Now, let me get to your question...

The 1979 Islamic Revolution

- Ayatollah Khomeini – reversed social policies associated with the Shah’s push for a modern Iran
- March 29, 1979 – Khomeini announced gender segregation of all beaches and sports activities
- April 1, 1979 – Mandatory *hejab* for all women at work places

Notes:

Following the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the Ayatollah Khomeini aggressively reversed any social policies associated with the Shah’s thrust for a modern Iran, including women’s sports. According to Sedghi (2007), “On March 29, 1979, he [Khomeini] announced gender segregation of all beaches and sports activities, and three days later he required all women to wear the Islamic *hejab* at work” (p. 201).

Changes...

- Men were in charge of public facilities
- Public recreation & sports facilities controlled by the Islamic government
- Initially all women were excluded from public recreation and sports facilities

Notes:

As a result, public parks, beaches, recreation and sporting facilities became male-dominated spaces that no longer welcomed women. Rather, men were charged with sole dominion over the public places that both genders once readily shared. In a matter of months, public recreation and sports facilities were under the control of the Islamic government and initially excluded women altogether (Brooks, 1995; Chehabi, 2006).

Audience: Is this what most Iranian women expected as a result of the Islamic Revolution; and what role did women play, if any, in the overthrow of the Shah?

Response: In the year and a half leading up to the Islamic Revolution, countless women donned the veil as a *symbol* of resistance against the Shah and participated in numerous political rallies, marches, and demonstrations (Moghadam, 1995). However, most women “did not expect *hejab* (veiling) to become mandatory,” but by 1981 veiling was strictly enforced (Moghadam, 1995, p. 341). As far as the gender segregation of public spaces, men and women began to see changes almost immediately and the organization of women’s sports was no exception.

Islamic Response

- 1981 – New Islamic government devised a “Sports Committee for Women”
- The Committee was assigned to handle the new and strictly segregated structure of women’s sports
- Name of organization changes two times – finally called “The Deputy of Physical Education Organization for Women Sports Affairs”

Notes:

In 1981, the new Islamic government devised a “Sports Committee for Women” to handle the new and strictly segregated structure of women’s sports (Brooks, 1995; Pfister, 2003; Sfeir, 1985). In 1985, the name was changed to the “Directorate of Women’s Sports Affairs,” and since 1989 the organization has been called “The Deputy of Physical Education Organization for Women Sports Affairs” (Pfister, 2003).

Women's Sports Organization (WSO)

- Founded in 1981
- 1989 – started to develop initiatives and activities for women in Iran
- Made up of women sports teachers, former top-level female athletes, sportswomen, and religiously oriented women's groups
- Worked to support physical activity

Notes:

“In addition, the Women's Sport Organization (WSO) was founded in 1981, which, however did not start to develop initiatives and activities until 1989. An alliance of women sports teachers, former top-level female athletes and sportswomen as well as religiously oriented women's groups worked together in order to propagate and support physical activities and sport for girls and women.

Faezeh Hashemi

- Daughter of former Iran President Rafsanjani
- Faezeh Hashemi– Vice-President of the Iran Olympic Committee
- Cited the Prophet and Islamic doctrines to support and legitimize women's sports
- Girls and women's health important for Islamic society and family happiness

Notes:

It was above all Faezeh Hashemi, daughter of Hashemi Rafsanjani and vice-president of the Iranian Olympic Committee, who had the determination, the political backing and also the right arguments to set women's sport on the agenda. In doing so, she quoted the Prophet and cited Islamic doctrine to lend weight and legitimacy to this initiative on women's sport. The crucial argument was (and is) the promotion of girl's and women's health, which would guarantee the health and the contentedness of their families” (Pfister, 2003, p. 213).

Audience: Did you say that Faezeh Hashemi was the vice-president of the Iran National Olympic Committee *and* that she is the daughter of a former Iranian president? Seems like pretty important information...don't you think?

Response: That is correct and I think it sheds light on what Pfister (2003) said earlier: The "Women's Sport Organization (WSO) was founded in 1981, which, however did not start to develop initiatives and activities until 1989" (p. 213). Please pay special attention to the years Faezeh Hashemi's father served as Iran's president (1989-1997). I believe you will be able to make some important connections.

Family Ties

- Hashemi Rafsanjani – Iran's president from 1989-1997
- Iran's women's sporting boom 1989-1997
- Faezeh Hashemi – grew up in a family who cherished sports
- Participated in swimming, bicycling, table tennis, and volleyball

Notes:

Hashemi Rafsanjani served the maximum allowed two-terms (1989-1997) as president of Iran and it was during this period that women experienced their own 'sporting boom' (Adelkhan, 2000; Pfister, 2003). Faezeh Hashemi grew up in a family who cherished sport and physical activity. In the privacy of their estate, they enjoyed swimming, bicycling, table tennis and volleyball (Brooks, 1995).

Political Backing

- Former President Rafsanjani supported his daughter's (Faezeh's) vision for women's sports
- Women's sports in Iran gains momentum

Notes:

Therefore, Rafsanjani supported his daughter's vision for the growth and development of women's sports and from his powerful political post was able to provide the backing his daughter needed to move women's sports forward (Adelkhan, 2000; Brooks, 1995; Hargreaves, 2000; Hargreaves & Vertinsky, 2007; Pfister, 2003).

Audience: So, what did Faezeh Hashemi say or believe that caused her father and/or other leading clerics in Iran to consider to women's sports in an Islamic society?

Faezeh's Gameplan

- Drew upon her own religious beliefs
- Recited the Prophet's directives for healthy living, strong bodies and physical training for all believers
- Faezeh also cited the recorded Hadiths

Notes:

Faezeh Hashemi drew upon her own religious beliefs, informed by the words of the Prophet Mohammad and the recorded Hadiths (narrations originating from the words and deeds of the Islamic prophet Muhammad). She recited the Prophet's directives for healthy living, strong bodies and physical training for *all* believers (Brooks, 1995; De Knop, Theeboom, Wittock, & De Martelaer, 1996; Hargreaves, 2000; Hargreaves & Vertinsky, 2007; Kahan, 2003; Kay, 2006; Pfister, 2003; Sfeir, 1985; Walseth & Fasting, 2003).

"Sports for all Women"

- Faezeh challenged the new Islamic government to differentiate itself from the Shah's elitist approach to women's sports
- Faezeh encouraged the new government to demonstrate and support "sport for all women"

Notes:

Furthermore, she drew upon anti-Shah rhetoric. Brooks (1995) stated, Faezeh argued that Iran's Islamic government could differentiate itself from the old shah regime by demonstrating that it was interested in 'sports for all women,' rather than the elite squad of top-flight athletes the shah had encouraged to show off amid the 'corruption' of mixed international competitions. (p.204)

Audience: Oh, I get it – I totally get it! Before the Islamic Revolution, “middle-class and university-educated women adopted Western dress and enjoyed sports and exercise,” but because Western imperialism was directly linked to a decadent, oppressive, and capitalist system, “sport therefore never touched the lives of most Iranian women.” Faezeh Hashemi challenged the new government to set it itself further apart from the old government, by offering sport for *all* women! Right?

Response: You’ve got it!

Audience: Well.....did it work?

Gaining Ground

- Key leaders were convinced to relinquish total control of sports facilities
- Women were granted all-women’s hours at certain sports clubs
- Runner Park set aside all-women’s hours 3 times per week so women could run without *hejab*
- More girls access to P.E. in schools

Notes:

The combined support of Faezeh Hashemi’s father, the holy words of the Prophet and anti-shah discourse convinced key leaders to relinquish absolute male domination of a *few* sports facilities. Women’s sports in Iran entered a new and exciting era. Female athletes were granted ‘women’s hours’ at certain sports clubs and ‘Runners Park’ in Tehran denied entrance to male runners three times per week for several hours during the day in order for women to run without hijab. In addition, girls were granted more sport and exercise opportunities in schools (Brooks, 1995; Pfister, 2003).

Audience: Wait a minute – that sounds like a clever use of a literary trope (Booth, 2005). It seems as if you are trying to frame women’s access to a *few* sports facilities, for a *few* hours a day, and to *one* park in Tehran *three* times per week for *several* hours a day as some kind of “real” victory for Iranian women. What if you considered changing your word choice? For example, “After a long decade of trying to organize women’s sports within a new Islamic framework, Iranian sportswomen were finally given a chance after Faezeh Hashemi and her father, Hashemi Rafsanjani, worked diligently to promote women’s sport participation. However, despite their noble efforts, women were *only given* access to a *few* sports facilities, for a *few* hours a day, and to *one* park *in Tehran*

three times per week for *several* hours during the *day*. Your claims *and* my claims are both “*true*,” however, the manner in which we each decided to frame the exact same information has created very different *meanings*.

Response: You are exactly right! As the one who constructed this text, I appreciate your thoughtful and engaging “challenge.” You must have the most amazing professor for your “Sport & Social Theories” class.

I wink at the audience because I know the professor.

It’s obvious he’s taught you to be a careful “consumer” of knowledge. You’ll learn a lot in his class – please tell him we gave a “shout-out” today on his behalf!

Audience: Ok, I’ll tell him. So, what happened next with women’s sports in Iran?

Notes:

During the 1980s, Mrs. Hashemi and her colleagues carefully *and* successfully carved out a space for Iranian girls and women to participate in sports within the new Islamic system. In 1981, swimming, badminton and gymnastics associations were formed, followed in 1982 by associations for basketball, table tennis, and athletics [track and field], and in 1983, the women’s volleyball association formed (Pfister, 2003). After a decade of slow and steady progress, Mrs. Hashemi and her colleagues turned their attention to Muslim women’s participation in international sporting events.

Women’s Sports Associations Formed

- 1981 – Swimming, badminton, and gymnastics
- 1982 – Basketball, table tennis, and track and field
- 1983 – Women’s volleyball

Islamic Countries' Women's Sports Solidarity Congress (ICWSSC)

- 1991 – IFWS hosted the first ICWSSC meeting in Tehran
- Purpose of the Congress was to establish a suitable framework for women's competitions (national and international) according to principles of Islam

Notes:

In 1991, the project for establishing the Islamic Federation of Women Sport (IFWS) was approved in the 2nd session of the Executive Board in the NOC of Iran (Hargreaves, 2000; Games Handbook, 2005). Later that year, the IFWS hosted the first Islamic Countries' Women's Sports Solidarity Congress (Hargreaves, 2000). Mrs. Hashemi's father gave the opening address and "explained that the purpose of the Congress was to establish the true status of women's sports in Islamic countries, and to set up a suitable framework for competitions according to the principles of Islam" (Hargreaves, 2000, p. 65).

All-Female Islamic International Sporting Event

- Organized in the Olympic framework
- Aim to hold competitions by following the Islamic Rules
- Promote peace, friendship, solidarity, and women's health and happiness
- Improves opportunities for "Sport for All"

Notes:

According to The Handbook of the 5th International Sports-Science Congress (2005), organized by the IFWS, the all-female Islamic international sporting event was organized in the Olympic framework with the aim of holding competitions by following the Islamic Rules, fortifying peace, friendship, solidarity, and the agreement that women deserve to be healthy and happy, through improving opportunities for "sport for all," championship games, and professional sport. The IFWS also promotes the national level of women in sport and the management, executive and technical abilities for women in member countries. (pp. 7-8)



Islamic Countries Games

- Scholarly attention devoted to the Games has focused upon the Game's Islamic structure
- Hosting the Games in Iran has ensured that all delegations adhere to competing and acting "according to the principles of Islam"

Notes:

While considerable media and scholarly attention has been devoted to the Islamic Countries Games (Adelkhan, 2000; Amara, 2008; Brooks, 1995; Gerhardt, 1987; Hargreaves, 2000; Hargreaves & Vertinsky, 2007; Pfister, 2003, 2005), most has focused upon the Games' Islamic structure. Hosting the Games in Iran has ensured that all delegations adhere to competing and acting "according to the principles of Islam."

Proctor holds up a sign – "5 MINUTES REMAINING"

Islamic Structure of Games

- Observing the veil and manteaux while in public and in the presence of men
- Competing in the approved sports attire
- No use of cameras or video cameras
- Men and boys only allowed to attend the Game's opening and closing ceremonies

Notes:

For women, such expectations included: observing the veil and manteaux while in public and in the presence of men; competing in the approved sports attire as approved by the Games' respective sports federations; and refraining from the use of video cameras or taking pictures during the course of the competitions (Article 3: General Rules, 2005). Men and boys were only allowed to observe during the Games' opening and closing ceremonies.

Question: Were the Games widely received or did they eventually fizzle out?

Success of the Games

- The IFWS has successfully organized four rounds of the Games
- The Games' name changed to The Islamic Women's Games in 2005
- The 2009 Games were postponed because Iran won the bid for the men's Islamic Games and did not have the financial resources or logistical support to carry out two international sporting events in the same year

Notes:

Up to now (2010), the IFWS has successfully organized four rounds of competitions for women in 1993, 1997, 2001, and 2005. The first and second rounds were held under the name of *The Islamic Countries Games*, the third competition was called *The Muslim Women's Games*, and the fourth round of contests was named *The Islamic Women's Games*. The name of the event was changed from *The Islamic Countries Games* to *The Muslim Women's Games* and most recently to *The Islamic Women's Games* in order to more accurately reflect the goals and objectives of the IFWS.

Question: How many athletes agreed to compete under the Islamic framework for women's sport participation?

The First Islamic Countries Games (1993) included 407 female athletes from 11 different countries.

The Second Islamic Countries Games (1997) included 748 female athletes from 24 different countries.

The Third Muslim Women's Games (2001) included 795 female athletes from 23 different countries.

The Fourth Islamic Women's Games (2005) included 1,700 female athletes from 40 different countries, including the first-ever American Muslim from the United States, Sarah Kureshi.

Notes:

These numbers are according the *The handbook of the 5th International Sports-Science Congress (2005)*.

Proctor: I'm sorry but we're out of time. I would like to thank everyone for attending tonight's lecture on the history of women's sports in Iran. Sarah, do you have any closing remarks for our audience?

Sarah: I, too, would like to thank everyone for attending tonight. I really enjoyed our interaction and hearing your perspectives and questions about the topic. If anybody has any additional questions, I'll be happy to stick around for a few minutes after the session.⁹

⁹ After the lecture, a student approached me and asked me if I ever attended the Islamic Women's Games. For a short personal story about my experiences at *The Third Muslim Women's Games*, please refer to the last chapter: Extra Inning.

Chapter 9: Women's Softball in Iran - Three Narratives

The following narratives are based on Richardson's (2005) notion of evocative and experimental writing. As a way to explore writing as "a method of discovery and analysis," I transformed personal memories, field notes, and portions of videotaped interviews into three different narratives (Richardson, 1994, p. 516). The "data" used to create the stories were collected in December 2007 and May 2008 while I was training softball players, coaches, and umpires in Tehran (Chang, 2007).

The process of writing the narratives allowed me to explore, consider, and "wrestle with" some of the complexities of my observations and experiences while living alongside Iranian women (Richardson, 2000a). As I created the narratives, I resisted the urge to abstract and explain (Ellis & Bochner, 2003). Instead, I focused on constructing scenes, dialogues, and narratives with "a plot, a moral, [and] a point to the story" (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). As Ellis and Bochner (2006) stated,

If you turn a story told into a story analyzed...you sacrifice story at the altar of traditional sociological rigor. You transform the story into another language, the language of generalization and analysis, and thus you lose the very qualities that make a story a story. (p. 440)

I ask the reader to refuse the impulse to theorize, analyze, or generalize the following narratives. Rather, I invite the reader to *feel* the truth of my stories, to identify with the characters, and to engage the storylines emotionally, intellectually, morally, and aesthetically (Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Richardson, 1994).

Field Number 4

The day was hot and humid. Heavy clouds hung low in the sky and a strong wind blew in from the south. That meant only one thing – an unlikely case for cool spring showers or a high probability for a dusty windstorm. We had finished our morning training session on practice Field # 4, a poorly maintained football (soccer) training ground tucked away in the remote back corner of the Azadi Sports Complex. Azadi was erected to host the 1974 Asian Championships, the last grand-scale international sporting event hosted in Iran (Amirtash, 2005). “*Freedom*” Stadium, the English translation of the word Azadi, bears the scars and neglect of the 1979 Islamic Revolution that sought to eradicate all forms of sport. Sport for the new regime represented all that was detested (Chehabi, 2006; Hargreaves, 2000). Sport represented modernity, corruption, commodification, capitalism, and individualism. Sport embodied the “Great Satan” and all her evils. Azadi also reaped the consequences of a long and devastating eight-year war with Iraq (1980-1988) (Amirtash, 2005). The war left few resources, time, or manpower to maintain the once impressive multi-sport complex. But on this day – 15 May, 2008 – Azadi came to life again.

It was nearly 2:00 in the afternoon. The strong winds blew the shutters, causing them to smash back and forth against the tiny steel barred windows of our small meeting room. Despite the racket from the heavy winds, we slowly recognized there was more going on outside than just a storm blowing in from the south. Once the chanting became so loud, we could no longer keep our attention on the softball training film. We all ran to the windows of the oval-shaped meeting room and pressed our faces in between the steel

bars. Men, hundreds, maybe thousands of them, marched in unison with raised fists chanting words I could not understand. I felt uneasy. I closely examined the facial expressions of the players and hoped for the best. I turned my attention again to the commotion outside and tried to figure out why a political rally was taking place at the Azadi Sports Complex? I had been training softball players at the Azadi for over seven years and never, I mean *never*, experienced *anything* like this.

All of the sudden, I noticed that everyone standing next to me was gone. I guess I was so lost in my own thoughts that I didn't notice everyone hastily donning the appropriate Islamic attire to go outside. I looked around and saw the players veiling, assembling their personal belongings, and loading up the equipment bags. They urged me to hurry and get my things together. I still didn't know what was going on, but did as I was told and followed the team outside. *Trust*. Did anyone think: "We probably shouldn't take Coach Sarah outside, it might be dangerous for her, as an American, to be seen in the middle of such a large political rally?" After all, did they forget (or were they too young to remember), the last time a mob of chanting men gathered in the presence of Americans? Things didn't turn out so well for people like me! I followed them anyway. I realized *in that moment*, that I trusted them. Completely. A few of the veteran players pressed into me, reassuring me with their eyes that everything was going to be ok. It was difficult to find passage, but we managed to stick together.

What's that awful smell? Is that blood I smell? It can't be....can it? Where is that smell coming from – it's disgusting! I looked down and saw a steady stream of fresh

blood running underneath my feet. It was *all* I could see. There were too many people around me to see anything but my own two feet.

But why was there blood streaming down the one-lane gravel road? What were all of these men doing here? What were they saying? Where were they going? Why were we in such a hurry? Where were we going? Why did we leave the safety of the classroom?

Suddenly, the crowd broke open and I could finally see the road ahead of me. I felt relief...I could actually see and I found enough space to take a deep breath. I stepped out of the stream of blood and found dry ground on the extreme right-hand side of the gravel road. I heard voices calling my name, "Sarah, Sarah – are you ok?" Two players were smiling at me. I smiled back, looked down at my blood-stained shoes and said, "Yes, I'm fine."

Minoo, Tehran's pitcher and a very good English speaker, pushed her way out of the crowds and joined us. Thank goodness. I finally had someone who could answer my questions.

Sarah (yelling over the noise): Minoo, what is going on? This is crazy!!!

Minoo (yelling back): Yeah, I know.

Sarah: What are all of these men doing here today? Is there some kind of political rally? Please, can you tell me what is happening?

Minoo: Of course, but are you sure you're ok? You look really pale...more than usual, I mean.

Sarah: Yes, I'm fine, but I don't understand and to be honest...I'm a little freaked out. There are so many men here and some of them seem so angry...and why is there blood everywhere?

Minoo smiled and grabbed my hand...we kept walking toward Field #4

Minoo: Don't worry about anything, Sarah – it's not a political gathering, it's a rally for the new Persepolis football coach. Some of the men are very happy today and some of them are very angry because of the coaching change. This is why everything seems so chaotic. It's for the new football coach.

Sarah: I'm sorry Minoo, did I hear you correctly? This is all for a *new football* coach?

Minoo: Yeah, I don't think you have this in your country, do you?

Sarah: Uhhhh, well, not exactly and *definitely* not for any soccer coaches! I guess fans get pretty crazy for college football (American-style) and men's basketball – maybe some professional American football teams have crazy fans...but, I can't say I've ever walked through blood...not on the way to any pep rally I've ever attended!

So, let me get this straight, if this is just for a new football coach, then I don't understand why we left the meeting room to fight through these crowds? Why didn't we just stay and finish our film session and then come back to the field for training after all of the madness cleared?

Minoo: Because Field #4 is in jeopardy! If we don't hurry up and get to the field, there is a chance that the men will take it from us...either for their rally or for playing football after the new coach is introduced. We must get there and start practicing before this happens. Field #4 has been reserved for softball so we cannot take a chance of losing it today. This is why we are in such a hurry. We aren't going to sacrifice our training time or training grounds for anything...certainly not for these men who can come to Azadi Stadium whenever they want! You know about this, right? We, I mean Iranian women, are not allowed to attend football matches at Azadi (Chehabi, 2006). The stadium seats over 103,000 people and not one single Iranian woman can be included! We've fought hard to be able to train on Field #4 and we'll be damned if we are going to lose it! Not today, not ever!

Sarah: Wow! Ok, now I understand...but you never answered me, where did the blood.....oh never mind, I see.

Lying right in front of me was a very large bull and two freshly slaughtered goats. The bull was still gasping for air and blood was spurting from the deep slit in his throat. His tongue looked thick and dry and hung out of the side of his mouth. His body violently convulsed, his eyes bulged from his head and then.... **thump**. His head crashed to the

gravel road and right there, right of front in of me, his struggle ended. The bull and goats were sacrificed on the altar of Field # 3 in honor of the new Persepolis men's football coach while Iran's first generation of women's softball players waited for me to start our afternoon training session...at "Freedom Stadium's Field # 4."

Maryam's Olympic Dream

"Everyone, attention, attention, everyone be quiet! Quiet I said – it's beginning now." Everyone's chatter quickly turned into a silent pause. The grandmother of the household had spoken with authority. Everyone in the family was together – all the children, nephews, nieces, aunts, uncles, cousins, parents, and grandparents. They were all seated on the floor around a large Persian carpet in the center room of the home. Tonight marked a very special occasion.

Grandmother: What's wrong with the satellite?

Her son: How am I supposed to know? Since when has our satellite ever been reliable?

Grandmother: If anyone causes me to miss this historic moment, I swear I will take my scarf off and personally wrap it around someone's little coward neck and strangle them until their eyes pop out of their heads.

Her son: Mother, please, there are children in the room. Show some respect for our traditions.

Grandmother: "Oh son, be quiet please, it's not possible for you to understand what this moment is like for a woman living in Iran...if you missed tonight's event, you would also

be ready to ring someone's neck. Now, please busy yourself with finding out what's wrong with the satellite. I am not going to miss this!

The men of the house made their way to the rooftop to check on the satellite while the children stood in tandem between the roof, stairs and living room. The kids shouted: "better, worse, go back.... right there, yeah, nooooo, go back, the other way, perfect – hold it there!"

From the television: Federal Republic of Germany. The Republic of Ghana. Greece.

Women in the house: Hurry, hurry, you're going to miss it!

The men all scramble down the stairs from the rooftop just in time to find their way back to the living room floor.

From the television: The Republic of Hungary. The Republic of Iceland.

Silence. Absolute silence. Even the children were motionless.

From the television: The Islamic Republic of Iran.

The living-room erupted with cheers. The 52-member Iranian Olympic team marched through the tunnel at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games and Homa Hosseini, a female rower, proudly carried the Islamic Republic of Iran's flag into the stadium. Homa was only the second woman in Iran's Olympic history to be named the country's opening ceremonies flag bearer.

Since the invention of the Modern Olympics in 1896, Iran has sent a total of 15 women to the Olympics (Pfister2003, Sfeir, 1985). Maryam will probably never be one of them.

Maryam's Dream: In her own words¹⁰ ...

I was born in the holy city of Mashhad in 1982. My father is a kind and supportive man and my mother was an athlete in her university. She was a gymnast and a runner. You know, now that I think about it, I think I was born to be an athlete. My uncles on my mother's side were all athletes too. Yes, I believe it is a genetic inheritance. Even when I was in middle school, I dreamed of playing every sport until I found one that would allow me to be a National Team member or to be a National Champion. Now, I am playing softball on the National Team. We have only played one international team in the four years I have been playing, but I hope one day we can represent Iran in many international softball competitions. I think the Olympics are important for Iranian women. It's a place where sports can help bring a lot of things together. The Olympics have brought people together from all different religions and nationalities. We can come together and be together as one. Everyone is happy at the Olympics, whether you win or lose or get eliminated from the games, you are happy, this is my opinion anyway. Whether you are observing the games, playing, working, or umpiring, everyone is happy and together and enjoying themselves. I think the most important part of having international competitions, for example when the GSP softball team was here from America, is not to see who would be the champion, but to have a space to dialogue about hijab, religion, and even politics. With these competitions, I believe friendships have a chance to grow. But without the opportunity for Iranian women to proudly represent our country or to carry our nation's flag, how will the world

¹⁰ Upon returning home, Maryam's words were translated from Farsi into English.

know who we are? How will they know that Iranian women are strong and powerful and that we really *are* athletes? How will our own nation know that we are proud? It's my dream to play softball outside my country and it's the dream of all the women athletes in Iran. We represent more than half of this nation...why shouldn't the world know who we really are?

My First Day of Softball: Samira

7am: Ring, ring, ring, ring...

Samira: Alo, khoobee? (Hello, how are you?)

Neda: Khoobam, merci (I am good, thanks). Are you going to that new class today?

Samira: I'm already here.

Neda: Are you crazy? I thought it didn't start until 9 o'clock? What time did you get up, 5am?

Samira: It's not important what time I got up and yes, it does start at 9am. I didn't want to miss this day for *anything*. Are you coming?

Neda: Yes, I'm coming. I will be leaving from the north of Tehran so I should get there just in time.

Samira: Ok, you better hurry, traffic is really bad today. Khodahafez (good-bye).

Knock, knock, knock...

Bang, bang, bang...

Samira (whispers to herself): Hurry up already. It's freezing out here! Let me in. There can't be men training in there this early, just let me in lady.

Louder – Knock, knock, knock...

Louder – Bang, bang, bang...

Locks rattle: Voice comes over the speaker mounted on the outside wall of the gymnasium.

Salon Manager (woman): Who is it?

Samira [Pushing the button of the speaker]: My name is Samira. I am here for the new softball class today.

Salon Manager: It doesn't begin until 9am. You'll have to wait outside.

Samira: Please Miss, please, I am freezing out here. My taxi dropped me off at the front gate of Azadi and I've been walking for 20 minutes to get here. The taxi driver couldn't bring me all the way to the gym because the guards at the entrance wouldn't let him pass. They said there are no events for women in the stadium today.

Salon Manager: You should have waited in your home or you should have had your father bring you. I will let you in, but you will have to wear hijab because men are in the salon working on the pipes. Before class starts, the men will leave and you girls can wear whatever you want, but until they are gone and until I can deadbolt all of the doors again, you will have to remain in hijab.

Samira (still pushing the button to the speaker): Yes, Miss, thank you manager. Thank you. I will stay out of your way.

Door opens

Samira enters and shivers from the cold. She rubs her hands together and blows warm air in her left fist, and then switches to her right one. Her nose is red, cold and running. She coughs from the stifling cold air deep inside her lungs.

The salon manager tells her to raise her arms above her head while she pats her down. She is looking in Samira's chador and winter coat for a camera, video camera, or camera phone.

Salon manager: You will have to leave your phone with me. You have a camera phone and once the softball class begins, you cannot have it with you. No photos will be taken while you women are training without hijab.

Samira: Of course, Miss, I understand. I am aware of the rules. I have been an athlete my whole life and have been playing basketball, handball, volleyball, and other sports in every salon in Tehran, so I know about the expectations. I need to keep my mobile with me until the class begins because I need to call my parents and let them know I arrived inside the salon at Azadi safely.

Salon manager: Yes, but don't forget to bring me your phone once you are finished calling your parents. If you don't...well, you understand the serious consequences of taking photographs of your friends without hijab. Do I make myself clear?

Samira: Yes m'am. You have my word.

Samira turned her phone over to the salon manager just before class started at 9am. At 6 o'clock in the evening, after the first softball training class ended, Samira retrieved her phone from the salon manager and caught a ride home with Neda, Mitra, and Parisa.

Samira: Thanks for the ride, Neda. I'll see you tomorrow, right?

Neda: Are you kidding me, of course I'll see you tomorrow. Do you want a ride in the morning?

Samira: No thanks. I'll take a taxi again or maybe my dad will take me tomorrow.

Neda: Are you sure? I don't mind coming to get you. You aren't being crazy are you? Do you think I will forget to pick you up?

Samira laughs and shrugs her shoulders. Neda laughs and shakes her head.

Samira: Ok, ok, come pick me up, but please, please, please **don't** be late! You know how morning traffic is and I don't want to miss a single second of softball practice. I was born to do this. I was born to be a softball player.

Neda: Yeah, but you were born to be a first-basewoman because you are tall and slow. Me, I was born to be a shortstop because I'm short and fast. See you tomorrow.

Neda drives away.

*Samira (yelling): **DON'T BE LATE!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!***

Neda honks her horn, waves from the window in a throwing motion, and disappears into the rush of Tehran traffic.

Samira enters her home

Samira: *Ma-mon, ma-mon* (mother, mother), where are you? Is daddy home yet?

Mother: I am in the kitchen, honey.

Samira races to the kitchen, forgetting to take off her scarf, coat and shoes.

Mother: Did I raise an animal for a daughter? Go take off your shoes and show some respect. And by the way, I am happy you are home before dark. I was beginning to worry and I don't want the neighbors to start talking about how "immoral" you are again because you are coming home late. I just can't listen to them anymore. Do you understand how important it is to carry the honor of our family name, Samira?

Samira: Mother, I'm so sorry. Is daddy home yet?

Mother: No, he is still at the office, but he called earlier and said he would be home around 8:00.

Samira struggles to get her shoes and coat off at the same time.

Samira: Mama, you should have been there today. It was amazing! You won't believe me, but I feel like I was born to do this! I love softball – I love everything about it! I felt so strong today...when I threw the ball or swung the bat – I felt powerful. There are so many exciting rules – this game is not boring at all, not like the other games. The more I learned, the more confidence I gained. By the end of training today, I felt like I could do anything, overcome any obstacle, or conquer any of my problems. I escaped from everything today mama – maybe because softball requires so much concentration, I don't know? I do know that daddy will be so happy to learn everything...especially when he hears how I'm a natural when it comes to softball. I want to become the best player in Iran...the best player in the world! How much longer before daddy comes home?

Mother: That's great honey, but what about basketball, volleyball, handball, and running? What about all the time you've spent training for those sports?

Samira: I know Mama, but softball is different. When the weather is warm, we can play outside. We can play in the open air. I will be able to play on the grass – they told us that when the weather is good we can play at Azadi Field #4. I've never played on any field at Azadi mother! And if you come with me, we can get out of the city and smell the spring air and the grass. It will be like going to the north of Iran. Being outside means we can feel the wind, hear the birds.... And the best part Mama, you want to know the very best part??? You *and* father can watch me play!!!! Did you hear me *ma-mon*? Daddy will be able to watch me play! After all 22 years of my life, daddy will finally be able to *watch me play!!!!*

Father enters front door

Father: Samira! Samira! Are you home yet dear? Hello...anyone home? Honey, is Samira home yet?

Samira: Daddy!!! I couldn't wait for you to get home. Sit down. I have so much to show you. I have so much to tell you.

Father (kisses Samira on the cheek): Ok honey, ok, hold on just a second... let me get my shoes and coat off before your mother....

Father takes his shoes off and hands his coat to Samira's mother to hang up.

Samira disappears and returns with a black bag and drops it at her father's feet.

Samira (unzipping the bag):

Look daddy.

Look at all these things.

This is a glove and it goes like this.

Other hand daddy,

you are right-handed so your glove goes on your left hand

so you can throw with your

writing hand.

Hold this.

Can you believe they call it soft?

Tell me, what's soft about it?

There were three bloody noses today and two busted lips today.

It's hard,

almost like a baseball – the coach told us.

It's just bigger

and I don't know why it's bright yellow, but I like it.

I'll have to ask the coach tomorrow.

Feel the seams.

Look at my blister.

This one is from throwing and this one is from hitting.

Here's how you hold the bat, daddy.

You try it.

No, the other hand goes on the bottom.

Elbow up.

Not that much.

Put your feet like this.
Line up your middle knuckles.
Give me the bat.

Make your hand like you are going to knock on grandmother's door.
Ok, that's how your knuckles should line up when you hold the bat,
your "knocking knuckles."
Isn't it great?

Don't you feel more powerful already?
Just holding the bat gives you power.
Just wait until you actually hit a ball.
It's the greatest feeling ever.
The sound of the ball hitting the bat – it's beautiful,
more than the opera.

Daddy, playing softball makes me feel like I can do anything!

Father: Samira, this is fantastic! I am so happy for you dear. Where did you get the equipment? We don't have these things here in Iran. I haven't seen a glove since before the Revolution.

Samira: The coach brought all of it. She brought enough for six new teams in Iran. She let me borrow this bag if I promised to bring everything back for tomorrow's training. I gave her my word and told her that I had to show my dad everything. She said she understood– she played sports with her dad everyday growing up. Can you believe how lucky she was?

Father: So, tell me all about the rules.

Mother: Come on you two. It's time for dinner. You can talk more about this after we eat.

Samira: Do we have to eat?

Father: Come on dear; let's not make your mother feel unappreciated. She's been working hard all day at home. Let's see what she made for dinner. Maybe we can find a baseball movie on television tonight and you can explain all the rules to me then.

Mother: Hurry up you two.... Dinner is getting cold.

Chapter 10: A Conversation with Marjan

In May 2008, Marjan and I sat down near a beautiful rose garden located on the backside of the Azadi Sports Complex. We had just finished our morning training session on Field #4 and had some time to hang out and talk before the afternoon scrimmage between Tehran and Mashad was scheduled to begin. The purpose of this chapter is to encourage conversations about how Iranian sportswomen live and to increase our awareness of the similarities and differences shared between us. Not unlike Ellis and Bochner (2006), this chapter seeks

to open up conversations about how people live, rather than close down with a definitive description and analytic statements about the world as is ‘truly’ exists outside the contingencies of language and culture. I believe the *conversational style of communicating has more potential to transform and change the world for the better*. As a multivoiced form, conversation offers the possibility of opening hearts and increasing our understanding of difference. (Ellis & Bochner, 2006 p. 435, italics added for emphasis).

Epiphany and Paradox: An On-Camera Conversation

May 20, 2008¹¹

Sarah (S): Since we’re on camera, would you mind introducing yourself please?

Marjan (M): My name is Marjan and I am from the northeast of Iran. I have been playing softball for 4 or 5 years. I’ve been a member of the National Softball Team for 2 years

¹¹ This on-camera account is a composite re-creation two different conversations I had with Marjan and Pad. The conversation with Marjan took place between a translator, Marjan and me; and the conversation with Pad was in English.

and my position is catcher. I started softball as a catcher. I'm 26 years old and I study physical education at my university.

S: Really, physical education? That's great! I'm curious, why did you choose to study in this field?

M: Ever since I was a little girl, I was constantly moving around – fidgety, I couldn't hold still! When I was in middle school, I had a vision of learning all different sports until I became very successful or a member of a National Team.

And also, my mother's side of the family – they were all athletes, especially compared to my father's family. All my uncles on my mother's side were athletes. One uncle was a basketball player and others were playing all different sports. My mother was a runner and a gymnast when she was studying in her university. It might be a genetic thing, I don't know.

S: So other than the fact that it's "in your blood," why do you want to teach physical education?

M: It helps the personality grow. Physical education and sports in general will teach a lot of things: Being healthy, sportsmanship, good attitude, chivalry, never to accept defeat, so they don't give up, and also it empowers them and helps them face all the problems in their way. Now I've learned all of these through sports because I was involved in sports since I was a little girl and I believe these are important for every child...boys *and* girls.

S: By the way Marjan, you don't have to wear all of your new catcher's equipment while we sit and talk before the scrimmage...

M: No, I *want* to wear all of it. I *love* it! It makes me feel stronger and I'm really happy I got rid of those old raggedy equipments. My shin protectors were really old and out of shape.

S: Yeah, I'm really happy *for* you...what's your favorite part about getting a brand new set of catcher's equipment?

M: Well, first the fact that I *look really good* in these! Also, I am really grateful for all of the things you have done for me and I know your movie and research about softball in Iran is going to be great...especially because I look so good in this [catcher's gear].

Laughing....

S: Can I ask you a question? How important do you think having the proper softball equipment is for the sport to grow and succeed in Iran?

M: Having equipment has a big role in the successful development in softball. Having the equipment means *doing* the sport, when you don't have a glove or when your glove is too old to work properly, you can never reach the quality you want in the game. And also something else, when someone new starts playing with a glove that's not right and they hurt themselves because they don't have the good equipment, they are going to lose interest; but if the equipment is good, it really attracts people to any new sport.

S: Looking at you in your catcher's gear and holding your new catcher's mask reminds me of what someone at home asked me...it's about playing in hijab ...do you mind to share your answer...you know, from your own perspective?

M: Of course, I would love to answer any questions about playing in hijab.

S: Thank you, one of my students asked, "Is it difficult to wear hijab underneath your catcher's mask?"

M: We're doing ok, well, as you like to say, every problem has a solution and we should never say never. Like you said earlier today, "With God all things are possible." Every problem has a solution. You might want to put on a slimmer, tighter fitting hijab so it's not bulky. For example, the hijab I had one day before yesterday was not good. I've been thinking about this...we could make special uniforms for Muslims like myself. They have done this for other sports in Iran; we should also do this for softball.

S: I agree. We should design it together so we can become rich and famous! Then, we could buy enough softball equipment to give to every girl or woman who wants to learn how to play!

M: Yes, and if we get *really* rich, we could build Iran's first and only softball stadium and name it "*The Iran – American Friendship Women's Stadium!*"

Laughing...and a high-five

S: I like the way you think, Marjan!

M: Sarah, tell me, what have you been thinking about this week...I always wonder about this, but never have the chance to ask you because you are always working.

S: Oh, thank you – it's interesting because I've been thinking a lot this week and I wanted a chance to talk to you about some things. You know, Marjan, I really respect your opinion.

Being in Iran with all of you (softball players) causes me to think a lot about my own experiences as an athlete. I have a lot of personal reflections, but I was wondering if you would mind talking about politics and sports for a little bit? Is it ok?

M: Yes, it's ok for me. I like talking about these things.

S: Great, thank you – have you ever heard about Title IX of the Education Amendments?

M: Yes, I have heard about this law during my studies in university, but I don't remember much about it. Coach Sarah, as you might know, we don't have the exact same law in Iran. Can you please remind me more about this law?

S: Sure Marjan...According to the United States Department of Labor (“Department of Labor,”),

Title IX Education Amendment, Section 1681 stated,

Prohibition against discrimination. No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.

This amendment included girls' and women's sport participation in federally funded schools and universities.

M: Yes, I remember now. What else?

S: With your permission, I would like to tell you about a recurring and evolving series of epiphanies (Curry, 1993). In order for all of this to make sense however, I would need to be honest with you about my old assumptions and stereotypes of women's sport in Iran. When I say “old,” I mean my perceptions of Iranian women *before* the first time I came here in February 2000.

M: Yes, of course. This is a good chance for me. Many women in Iran are curious about what foreign women think about us. I think this is very natural for *every* woman living in *every* country. It matters very much what other women, especially foreign women from different cultures think about Iranian women (Stonebanks, 2008).

Pause for self-reflection:

Interesting perspective: “I think this is very natural for every woman” to be curious about or concerned with what “foreign women from different cultures think about [us.]” I don't think most American women ever pause to consider what “Other” women from “Other” cultures think about them. This is a perfect example of Antonio Gramsci's cultural hegemony...I'll have to remember this conversation and use it as an autobiographical example (O'Sullivan, 2007; Stonebanks, 2008) in my “Women in Sports: A Global Perspective” course.

S: Thank you, Marjan. I appreciate your friendship and I am thankful that our years of experiences on and off the softball field have allowed us to trust each other and learn from one another. I really value these qualities of our relationship. Perhaps you and some of the other softball players think that I am *the* “teacher” because I am the “coach,” but I think it’s important for you all to know that you have taught me *way* more than I have ever taught you! I am not talking about softball mechanics, strategies, or rules; I am talking about what’s most important – *life*. I have learned about an amazing and historically rich Persian culture; I have learned about strong, committed, dedicated, talented, kind, and athletic women. When I look into your faces, I see the pioneers of women’s sports from my own country. One day Marjan, your stories as Iran’s first generation of women’s softball players will be recorded in the history books – your accomplishments will forever be memorialized in the hearts and minds of people from Iran and beyond. Do you realize the significance of what you’re doing?

M: Thank you, Coach Sarah. But we have never thought about playing softball from the perspective you are speaking. We just play softball because we love it so much, not because we want to make a special history for ourselves. However, what you are saying is very interesting for me to think about now. Where are you going with this idea?

S: Well Marjan, when Mrs. Hashemi invited GSP to come eight years ago: (1) to evaluate women’s sports programs, (2) to explore strategies for making improvements, and (3) to promote solidarity between our countries through sports-related exchanges, I had serious doubts about a realistic chance for any success. My ideas about Iranian people came from memories of images I saw on television when I was only eight years old. I could only imagine uneducated women who wore black capes, stayed at home, and hated Americans. Unfortunately, I never had a legitimate reason to think any differently about Iranian women (Stonebanks, 2008). Before coming here, I never heard that Iranian women were educated, socially active, and/or interested in recreational and competitive sports. I am *ashamed* to admit all of this to you, but it’s the truth.

M: Don’t be ashamed, Sarah, we all have assumptions about each other. It’s part of being human.

S: I don’t claim to speak on behalf of *all* Americans, but I do think that most people from my country assume the same kind of Iran I imagined before I experienced your culture for myself. Unfortunately, the American media continues to focus on our governments’ troubled past and ongoing tensions (Stonebanks, 2008).

M: I don’t think our media in Iran is really any different...

S: Therefore, images of the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the American Hostage Crisis framed *everything* I pictured about Iran, which led me to the following assumptions: (1) *All* Iranian people – including women – hated *all* Americans; and (2) Women’s sports in

Iran *prior to 1979 must have flourished* compared to the opportunities available for women *after* the Islamic Revolution.

M: If I were to be honest too, I guess my assumptions about American women weren't that much different: (1) I assumed that *all* American citizens disliked Iranians very much and especially held bad views about us; and (2) I assumed that *all* American sportswomen were immoral, with bad and arrogant character.

S: Marjan, I really appreciate you talking with me about these important issues.

M: Me too.

S: Ok, so here's what I've been thinking about this week...that is the question you asked me earlier, right?

Both laughing

M: Yes...I think so anyway!

S: Do you know the English word – paradox?

M: Yes. It means something like “absurd” or a “statement or idea that contradicts itself.”

S: Sometimes I think your English is better than mine!

M: I think so too...*(laughing and winking)*!

S: How about the word epiphany?

M: What is this...some kind of American game show? Yes, epiphany means something like a “sudden realization.”

S: Ok, it's confirmed...your understanding of the English language really is superior to mine!

M: Don't doubt yourself too much, but I *do* know that my English is *WAY* better than your Farsi!!!!!! So why did you ask me about the words paradox and epiphany?

S: Drum roll please...here's what I've been thinking about:

As I've traveled throughout Iran teaching softball since 2002, I have witnessed significant improvements and increased opportunities for Iranian sportswomen on all levels. Along the way, a series of epiphanies have led me to this very exciting paradox.

Be patient with me please – it’s still taking some time to piece together this puzzle of personal epiphanies. Let me also say, the statistical comparisons I use are not based upon the same set of criteria or principles. I am using the data that is available and hope you’ll still find this paradox and my “conclusions” as fascinating as I do.

M: Great...I love puzzles!

S: Ok, great.

M: Do I need any paper?

S: No...you’ll figure it all out! Oh, wait a second, let me put a new tape into the camera...I think this one is almost finished.

M: Ok – I’m gonna go get us some water.

S: Thanks!!!!

Sarah switches the tape and Marjan comes back with two cups of water

S: Here we go –

The United States of America:

On June 23, 1972 – Title IX of the Education Amendments was enacted by Congress and signed into law by Richard Nixon. (“Women’s Sports Foundation,”)

The Islamic Republic of Iran:

On February 1, 1979 – Exiled religious leader Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini returned from France to assume control of the revolution and establish himself as Supreme Leader of a new, theocratic republic guided by Islamic principles. (“U.S. Department of State: Diplomacy in action,”)

S: Ok, so far we have two very different, but significant political movements. Title IX of the Education Amendments was a secular political movement and the Islamic Revolution was a religious political movement.

The United States of America:

On April 7, 1980 – The United States broke diplomatic relations with Iran (Rosenberg, 2006).

The Islamic Republic of Iran:

After 1980 – Iran adopted positions opposed to those of the United States on a wide variety of international issues. (“Iran: A Country Study,” 1987)

S: Since the 1980s, the United States of America (The Great Satan) and the Islamic Republic of Iran (Member of the Axis of Evil) have not had diplomatic relations.

The United States of America:

Before Title IX of the Education Amendments in 1972 –Only 295,000 girls played high school sports compared to 3.7 million boys in 1971; and in the same year 32,000 women played collegiate sports compared to 180,000 men (Coakley, 2009).

The Islamic Republic of Iran:

Before the Islamic Revolution in 1979 – Approximately 10,000 Iranian women participated in some form of sport (Longman, 1998). The population of Iran was estimated at 33,379,000 in 1975. (“About Iran,”)

The United States of America:

In 2008, there are 3.06 million girls playing high school sports and over 180,000 playing collegiate sports (Coakley, 2009).

The Islamic Republic of Iran:

In 1998 – Approximately 2 million Iranian women participated in some form of sport (Longman, 1998). The population of Iran was estimated at 65,865,302 in 2000. (“About Iran,”)

M: Interesting comparisons, Sarah. Can we finish putting the puzzle together?

S: Absolutely.

Birth years:

Marjan: Born in 1982 –	Three years after the Islamic Revolution
Sarah: Born in 1971 –	One year before Title IX of the Education Amendments

Birthplaces:

Marjan:	Born in the Islamic Republic of Iran
Sarah:	Born in United States of America

Since 1980:

United States of America:	Cut off diplomatic relations with Islamic Republic of Iran
Islamic Republic of Iran:	Adopted positions opposed to the United States of America

Experiences in sport:

Marjan:

You were born in a place and during a time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) in which the *religious political movement* of the 1979 Islamic Revolution directly impacted the ways you have experienced sports in your own country.

Sarah:

I was born in a place and during a time (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) in which the *secular political movement* of Title IX of the Education Amendments (1972) directly shaped my experiences as female athlete in my own country.

In theory:

You and I *should* be “*others of opposition*,” namely “enemies” because our home countries [Iran and America] have “differences in behaviors, beliefs, or customs [that] are deemed to be not only irreconcilable but also threatening to the very existence” of one another (Chang, 2007, p. 26).

In reality:

* The implications of two radically different *political movements* have yielded greater access and opportunities for girls and women to participate in sports in our respective countries.

* Therefore, the result of *your* “greater access” to sport and physical activity and *my* “greater access” to sport and physical activity, has allowed both of us the *unique* opportunity to experience sports in such a way that we are

Against all political odds...

sitting here *together* in Tehran, in front a video camera, documenting our lives and conversations about the value of women’s sports.

M: Amazing – I never thought about it this way – I don’t know what else to say...

S: You don’t have to say anything, Marjan. You asked what I’ve been thinking about – now you know! You want to take some batting practice? Come on, let’s go...I’ll pitch.

Chapter 11: Iran – USA Friendship Games 2007

In July 2007, the Iran Softball Federation and Global Sports Partners organized the country's first-ever international women's softball tournament. The *Iran-USA Friendship Games* were held in Tehran's Azadi Sports Complex on Field #4 and included teams from Tehran (2), Mashad, Bushehr, and a GSP team made up of former high school and college players. The purpose of the tournament was twofold: (1) to provide Iranian softball teams with an opportunity to compete against international competition, and (2) to demonstrate the use of sport in fostering cross-cultural respect, appreciation, and dialogue.

The goal of this chapter is to invite the reader to partake “on the journey of discovery instead of living in the vacuum of extremes that has led to unethical representations and actions” (Stonebanks, 2008, p. 297). Therefore, I offer the following short narrative about the *Iran-USA Friendship Games*, translated videotaped interviews with softball players, and a blogger's response to our cross-cultural exchange.

Foul Ball

I delivered the pitch and Sarvenaz, a player for Tehran's red team, took a hard swing. She made contact but the ball flew high into the air, drifting toward foul territory between the catcher, third-basewoman, and me – the pitcher. Instinctively, we all moved toward the ball and at the last minute, I decided I had the best angle and chance for a diving catch. I waved my arms in the air and yelled at the top of my lungs several times, “I got it, I got it!” Then, I planted my right foot and lunged past the foul-line. With my

arms and legs completely outstretched, the ball tipped the end of my glove and....fell to the ground. “FOUL BALL,” the umpire yelled.

I immediately grabbed my right knee. Rainey (Raj), GSP’s third-basewoman knelt down beside me.

Sarah: Raj, this isn’t good!!!

Raj: What happened? I thought you had it?

Sarah: Me too, but I think I *really* hurt my knee....

Raj: Oh no, are you serious? Did you hear anything pop?

Sarah: I’m not sure, I think so, but I can’t remember. All I know is my entire body went forward, and my knee buckled and went in the opposite direction. I can feel it...it doesn’t feel right! Maannnn.... it’s our first game and you know how long I’ve been waiting for this day?

Raj: I know, I know...don’t think about it like that, yet. Are you in pain right now?

Sarah: I hate to admit it, but yes, very much so...man this sucks!

Arastoo and Dr. Zardooz walk over from the makeshift press box to check on me.

Arastoo: Sarah, my dear, honey – are you ok?

Sarah: Thanks Arastoo, I’m not sure. I think I hurt my knee.

Arastoo: Is there anything you need? We can arrange for you to visit a doctor.

Sarah: Is it possible to get a bag of ice?

Arastoo: Yes, dear – I will send for someone right now.

Dr. Zardooz: Sarah, do you think it is necessary to see a doctor? We have many qualified sports doctors in Iran. I can begin to make arrangements for you to get your knee examined by a specialist.

Sarah: Dr. Zardooz, yes, I think that would be wise. Thank you very much.

Dr. Zardooz: Please excuse me; I will make some phone calls now.

Raj: Let's move you over to the tent so you can get out of the sun. Do you need some water?

Sarah: Yeah, that would be great. Thanks Raj.

Several players from Tehran's team came over to help me to the tent. The game continued, I iced my knee, and spent the rest of the game talking to players from Mashad and Bushehr about the strategies, positions, and situations happening throughout the contest. After the friendly game was over, Dr. Zardooz and a few friends loaded me in the federation van and took me to see the orthopedic specialist. After the physical exam and MRI results, the doctor called me the next day to inform me of the news: "I'm sorry Miss Sarah, but as I suspected, you have torn your ACL." Although I was extremely disappointed, the injury gave me the opportunity to collect the following videotaped interviews¹². I asked each of the players the following question: "Please introduce yourself and tell me your ideas about softball and these *Friendship Games* between the GSP team from America and the teams from Iran."

Somayeh

My name is Somayeh, I am 23 years old, and I am from Mashad. Currently, I am playing as a member of Iran's first National Team. The games between the American [GSP] team and our [Iran] team were really great and so is the level of competition, especially Alissa's pitches. She is extremely fast with high quality placement. I hope that one day, pitchers in Iran can pitch like her. I wish that the quality of our games in Iran

¹² These interviews were collected on-camera and with the help of an Iranian translator. Upon returning home, the on-camera interviews were translated into English.

progress to the same level as United States and other countries that have been playing this sport for much longer than we have. I really hope we can compete in advanced levels. We are very glad that the United States [GSP] is working with us. It really helps us improve in this field. As far as political ideas between American women and Iranian women, well, I think many things [between our governments] will stay as they are for a while, but now, with the help of this American [GSP] team coming to Iran, I think the friendship between our countries has started to grow.

Sonia

Hi. I am Sonia from Gilan's Team and I am 26 years old. I like softball because of the excitement. It is a sport that requires concentration and at the same time it is very fun. I have been playing for only one year. I am really glad that I was invited to the softball camp a few months ago. I hope to be a great and successful player next year. I want to thank you [GSP] for coming here with the Islamic hijab and that you played in the same kind of Islamic dress that we wear. It was excellent! We really enjoyed that your team accepted to wear this covering. It is great that, although you hadn't been used to wearing hijab the way we had from childhood, you could still respect our customs and play with the *veil*. I say this because in the previous years, they [women from other countries] thought that hijab is a limitation – and that you cannot be a good athlete and still observe the Islamic dress code. But now, we see that you, just like us, could wear hijab and play freely and with good quality. Thank you, we think our relations are already getting better between our countries. Talking about things like sports, politics, religion, and Islamic

beliefs in hijab, as well as learning about one another's cultures, brings us closer. We can go home from Tehran and tell our families and friends about the American [GSP] girls we met and likewise your team can go home and do the same. You can tell everyone about the conditions of women's sports in Iran. Now, both of us have something good to say about one another and this helps us to understand and to move closer to peace between our people.

Mehrnoosh

Hello. My name is Mehrnoosh. I am 20 years old and I am from Tehran. I know you Sarah because you were my coach just a few months before. I like you very much because you talk kindly about Iran and our customs. I like softball very much and I want my baby girl to play softball too because it's exciting for me, and I like it. I would like to be a pitcher, but I think I am more suited to play centerfield, [and] catching...maybe because I am a gymnast and a fast runner, and softball has running and excitement. I have told my husband and his family about our softball camp together and now about these *Friendship Games*. They are happy for us to meet one another and to have a good chance to talk about our differences and similarities. You know, Sarah, Iranian people like Americans and now we see that many Americans like us too. What better results could we ask for from these games than to promote friendship between our countries? These things are more important than the final score and now we can tell people about this important matter.

Aneseh

Hi. I am the organizing manager of the teams and I worked with the camp's organizer too. I am 33 years old and a wife and mother. I am really glad that I was involved in this process. I had a great experience. I think that softball is an exciting sport and what's so great about it, is that we have women on the team from all ages playing this sport. I am glad that the ladies from the United States [GSP] took the effort to come here and play with us. This is a great opportunity for Iran to connect to women from other countries and hopefully, we can invite them to future tournaments. I am a physical education teacher in Province 5 of Tehran and I hope that one day, with the help of these tournaments, and our government, [that] we are experienced enough in softball to offer it in every school in the country. I was not familiar with this sport before and seeing the progress in this field, I see a bright future of softball in Iran. I would like to thank the leaders of the Softball Federation. I am confident that our youth have a bright future in this sport and in a new dialogue between our countries. This is very exciting for me and I will be teaching these lessons of friendships to my students.

Venus

The three of us live in Dashti, a town three hours away from Bushehr. I am 20 years old and my teammates are both 22 years old. After Sarah and Alissa trained us in Bushehr, we all went back to Dashti and gathered a group of teenagers who also wanted to learn softball but who could not travel for the camp. We tried to teach them what we learned, but unfortunately we did not have many softballs, bats, or gloves. So, we made

bats out of scrap wood and used badminton birdies instead. We are in dire need of more equipment to teach the girls in our city. There are many of them who want to play but without good equipment it will be too difficult. We have taught the girls the basic rules of the game, but there is only so much you can do with 2 balls and 2 bats.

With that said, I am confident that we will make progress because we have very determined players who want to learn despite the conditions. We have done all we could with the little equipment that we have. Actually, we are very passionate about this sport – we worked hard after Alissa and Sarah came and coached us. Now, we have a better idea of how to train other players. I am sure that if we work hard and are given the chance, we will not only make progress in the national level, but will be in a level to compete internationally.

I want my family to meet you and I hope you can bring more equipment for our young players. We have dreams of playing for our country one day and making our families proud of our hard works and dreams.

Esmat

Let me know if I talk too much...In the name of God, I am Esmat from Bushehr. I am 27 years old. Ever since I was a child, I really liked baseball – I watched it on television and I dreamed of learning how to play. I was very glad when I heard that softball has become a sport in Iran. I have been playing this sport successfully, well, at the level that we have. I have been playing for about 4 years and I think it is the best

game. In comparison to other sports that I play [soccer, basketball, handball], I think softball is a beautiful game that's both fun and entertaining.

I think there ought to be more of these [friendship] tournaments going around because in order to change their [American women's] minds about us and to see the positive aspects of women's sports in Iran, someone has to do what you are doing. You have to come to Iran and see us for yourself. There's nothing to be done, we can only show them that the impression they have of us is wrong. And also, I want to add, having sports without politics is one major way to get to friendships in the future between our countries. It's a big way to start friendships and communication.

For example, this *Friendship Softball Tournament*...I really like this. I like it when we, women of different countries, and not just women from the United States, but when women from around the world can connect and communicate about everything including hijab, religion, and even politics. The foreign media often portrays Iranian women as oppressed because of our hijab; this is not true. We have a saying in Iran, which is really more than just a proverb; it is the truth that "hijab is not a limitation, but a protection." It protects women from many dangers in the society. We have proved that we can play softball with hijab.

Can I say something directly to the women from your country who will see this interview? Thank you, yes, I want to send them all a message of peace and tell them that despite our differences, despite the differences in our societies and the ways that we live, we *can be* great friends. I wish that we keep having these sports competitions and that one day we go there [America] and play, and that more teams come here more often. We

will be very glad to receive them and continue this very important dialogue. Ok, that's all. Thank you very much.

Returning Home

After a week of friendly competitions, sightseeing with new friends, and buying famous Persian souvenirs, we returned home to the United States. I was excited that our GSP volunteers had the opportunity to meet so many of my close Iranian friends and experience the warmth and beauty of the Persian culture. I was equally as happy to introduce my American friends to the Iranian softball teams. Since returning, I have thought about Esmat's words on several occasions,

“I think there ought to be more of these [friendship] tournaments going around because in order to change their [American women's] minds about us and to see the positive aspects of women's sports in Iran, someone has to do what you are doing. You have to come to Iran and see us for yourself. There's nothing to be done, we can only show them that the impression they have of us is wrong.”

Unfortunately, the current reality is that very few Americans will ever visit the Islamic Republic of Iran. Therefore, we (GSP volunteers and I) shoulder the ethical responsibility to share our personal experiences and offer counternarratives whenever we are confronted with ignorant stereotypes, lingering distrust, or hateful discourse about “*all Iranian people.*”

The Spirit of Man BlogSpot

As a way to demonstrate the importance of offering counternarratives about our experiences at the *Friendship Games* (Stonebanks, 2008), I have included the following entry from “The Spirit of Man BlogSpot.” On Tuesday, August 7, 2007, the writer of this blog posted a picture of the American-GSP team posing with one of the Tehran teams. Both teams were dressed in Islamic-appropriate softball uniforms and were standing behind a banner that read:

*Iran – USA
2007 Friendship Games
Tehran, Iran*

Just above the photograph, the blogger titled his post:
Friendship?

Below the picture, the post stated:

“US Women’s softball team is in Tehran and their presence is all over the regime’s news media as probably what I can call ‘Propaganda Campaign.’

What does “Friendship” mean when Iranian regime is hell bent on killing American soldiers in Iraq? Well you may say this is inter-people stuff but, hello!!!! Anything of this sort has the official stamp of the theocratic regime of Iran.

Moreover, look these Americans are wearing Hijab...Wink! Wink!”

In response to the main post, 8 comments were added. The following represent selected portions of the eight responses:

- (1) In the era of propaganda, these types of Friendships are the most desirable for the “public.” On one hand, the regime in Iran calls the US, the Great Satan, and on the other, the American Sisters have been enjoying their stay in Iran, the country which was declared as one of the Axes of Evil.
- (2) ...now we have the Sisters in Iran.

- (3) Thanks for this educational post. I just realized that I don't know what is going on within the political world....
- (4) It is a mixed message, playing nice to great satan's people – a great distraction to the realities...
- (5) But it is the naïve westerners who bought into the hands of mullahs and their likes and become a tool in the mullah's propaganda campaign. That's why I am furious at such things. Americans must know better but it seems that they don't.
- (6) Americans can be so naïve sometimes and down right dangerous when they do this stuff! Drives me crazy!
- (7) What if this softball stuff results in the populace learning more about the Americans and our values? What if it helps create a hunger for the freedoms we enjoy, that they do not? What if it plays a role in the growth of a movement that fosters a change in the Iranian regime? What if they supply enough women's softball bats to arm a feminist revolution?

My response to “Mr. Blogger.”

Initially, I was very disappointed and angry when I read this blog. I wanted the opportunity to say to “Mr.Blogger” and “Mr. and Miss Comments” the following:

- “How could you, who know *nothing* about the details of the friendly competition, make such hateful and ignorant assumptions?”
- “How could you make such gross overgeneralizations?”
- “How could you *not* even consider the potential value in these types of cross-cultural sporting exchanges?”
- “How could you make such ill-informed accusations about your fellow Americans – calling us naïve and dangerous?”
- “You don't even know us!”
- “You don't even know the Iranian softball players.”
- “You don't know that I have been working in Iran for the past decade.”
- “You don't know how well I've been treated.”
- “You don't know the Iranian Softball Federation.”
- “You don't know the IFWS.”
- “You don't know anything about the shared goals of the *Friendship Games*.”
- “Who are *you* to say *anything* about something you know *nothing* about?”

Perhaps my emotions got the best of me or maybe my initial reactions were appropriate for the situation? Regardless, as I spent more time thinking about “Mr. Blogger” and

“Mr. and Miss Comments,” I realized that it was unfair for me to expect anything different. Like my own previously held perceptions and stereotypes of Iran, they too, have probably never been confronted with an alternative “story” or “truth” to consider. Therefore, I will continue to use personal narratives “as a source of empowerment and a form of resistance to counter the domination and authority of canonical discourses” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 749).

Chapter 12: Concluding Thoughts

Autoethnography is a term foreign to most Sport Studies scholars. As Sparkes (2002) suggested, the majority of Sport Studies literature is “trapped” in what Denzin & Lincoln (2000) refer to as the fourth moment of knowing: the Crisis of Representation, Legitimation, and Praxis. The fourth moment is a turning point in qualitative research when the researcher no longer claims to be a neutral observer or a benevolent authority giving voice to the participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The fourth moment marks a shift away from the positivist ideals of quantitative science (validity, reliability, generalizability) toward a creative and expressive prose more aptly suited for qualitative research (Sparkes, 2002; Richardson, 2001). Autoethnography, a form of narrative inquiry, details both the personal and the theoretical and has emerged as a new form of writing during the fifth moment of qualitative research – the Experimental Writing phase (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Sparkes, 2002).

When I was introduced to the term autoethnography, it sounded exotic, introspective, and progressive. More importantly, it sounded evocative, heart-felt, and less colonial than other methods I had studied. What I didn't know or expect was how difficult it would be to actually write one...to make myself vulnerable...to expose my inner thoughts, my naïve or ignorant reflections...to write in such a way that touches the reader...to tell a good story...to unmask myself as the author...to take responsibility for the way I frame other people and situations...to decide which stories to tell and which ones to leave out...to resist over-theorizing or generalizing...to hold the reader's attention ...to know when to finish and walk away...and most importantly, to stay true to

my promises to the Iranian sportswomen who have touched my life. Little did I know that writing about a place where I had spent so much time and developed such deep-rooted relationships would ever be this difficult.

As evidenced throughout this autoethnographic journey, the primary purposes of this account were four-fold: (1) to confront my previously held stereotypes and reveal my personal transformation, (2) to provide a counternarrative that “extends sociological understanding” (Sparkes, 2002), (3) to demonstrate the use of sport in fostering cross-cultural respect, appreciation, and dialogue, and (4) to offer new ways of knowing and telling (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Richardson, 2000b). The idea behind this text was to engage the reader in a way that they too were inspired “to care, to feel, to empathize, and to do something, to act” (Ellis & Bochner, 2006, p. 433). In order for this goal to be accomplished, I used a variety of literary forms, including short story, monologue, dialogue, personal reflections, self-talk, dramatic tales, conversations, hypothetical situations, and composite re-creations of experience (Richardson, 2000a). Furthermore, I asked the reader to “judge” my work using the following criteria: (1) Did I make a substantive contribution to the field of Sport Sociology? Did my dissertation contribute to the understanding of social life in Iran, specifically for Iranian sportswomen? (2) Did my writing achieve aesthetic merit? Did my use of creative analytical practices open up the text and invite interpretive responses? Were my narratives artistically shaped, satisfying, complex and not boring? (3) Did I accomplish reflexivity throughout my dissertation? Did I express adequate self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make judgments about my point of view? Did I hold myself accountable to the standards of

knowing and telling about the Iranian sportswomen I studied? (4) Did my dissertation impact me, my co-participants, and the reader emotionally and intellectually? Did it generate new questions? Did my research inspire the reader to write or to explore new writing practices? Did it move me and the reader to action?

As I patiently wait on another opportunity to return to Iran, I am left to draw upon the precious and vivid memories of my last visit. During my last visit, we envisioned a research project that reflected “our voices” – my voice coupled with the voices of the women softball players in Iran. It was our goal to challenge some of the cultural, historical, and political misunderstandings between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States of America (Stonebanks, 2008). We imagined that by co-constructing multiple representations that new voices could emerge and be heard among educators, athletes, women, politicians, and ordinary citizens in both countries. We dreamed that through this project, ignorant, negative, or inaccurate stereotypes, on both sides, could be replaced with a shared sense of humanity between our people (Clark & Sharf, 2007). We agreed to co-construct this project in such a way that as many Iranians and Americans as possible could have access to the final product. However idealistic or lofty our goals seemed, we agreed that *to do nothing* was the equivalent of an athlete who has trained her whole career, only to withdraw from the final and most important race of her life. As athletes and coaches, we agreed that “withdrawing from this race” was not a viable option.

I knew after several visits to Iran that I would someday write about my experiences – the culture, the hospitality, the tradition, and the genuine relationships

developed with the Iranian people compelled me to detail my journey. I am thankful for the kindness, the warmth, and the embrace exhibited by my Iranian friends; they have taught me more than even this dissertation is able to capture. And in some small way, this dissertation is an offering of gratitude to the women of Iran for allowing me to partake in their lives. Thank you.

Chapter 13: Extra Inning

The Third Muslim Women's Games

Hopes were high for *The 2001 Muslim Women's Games*. With the first and second rounds of the large-scale all-female Games behind them, IFWS organizers set out to shatter the previous participation records. They initially succeeded. Forty countries announced their intent to participate, by far the largest contingency to date (Pfister, 2003). However, as a direct result of the October 7, American-led military operation in Afghanistan, twenty-seven countries withdrew from the Games (Pfister, 2003). Team organizers “assumed the region was not safe”, and kept their athletes at home (Event Booklet, 2005, p. 19). Nevertheless, the competitions continued.

With over 13,000 spectators assembled for *The Third Muslim Women's Games'* opening ceremony (Event booklet, 2005), Faezeh Hashemi delivered a powerful opening address. She welcomed the athletes, commended them for their accomplishments and then turned her attention to the most relevant issue weighing on everyone's mind – Afghanistan.

Standing in the center of the Enghelab Sports Complex on a small raised platform, Mrs. Hashemi clutched the hem of her chador, pulled it tightly under her chin, and raised her eyes to the audience. With conviction in her voice, she charged everyone to join in solidarity for the Afghan people. She spoke directly to the Afghan athletes present in the stadium and praised them for their bravery. She lauded their commitment to join other Muslim women in a sign of strength, sports and solidarity. In the middle of Mrs. Hashemi's oration, a young Afghan woman stood to her feet and raised her country's flag

high above her head. At that moment, 13,000 spectators joined her and the stadium erupted in cheers. I was one of them.

Meeting Nasrin – Before the opening ceremonies

The taxi was scheduled to arrive at Azadi Olympic Hotel to pick me up around 4 o'clock in the afternoon. I will never forget the energy that consumed the hotel lobby. Female coaches, referees, translators, athletic trainers, managers and athletes buzzed in and out of the hotel as they waited anxiously for the assigned bus that would transport them to the *Games'* opening ceremony. I stood outside the hotel under a covered porch lined with beautiful Persian art and a mosaic that depicted the historical contributions of Islamic science, math, art and architecture. The October air was crisp and extremely fresh (at least by Tehran standards). I thought about family. I thought about friends. I thought about everyone who told me, "Don't go to Iran, it will be too dangerous for you. Iran is not safe, especially now...not after what happened on 9/11. Things are different now, Sarah, the world is not the same...it will never be the same." I smiled inside. I knew I was *exactly* where I was supposed to be.

As I waited, I took in all of the sights and sounds around me. After a few minutes standing alone, three adult women and a young girl walked up and stood beside me. The women looked to be in their mid-to-late fifties. The young girl couldn't have been older than thirteen or fourteen. She looked so innocent, so fragile, so full of hope. She was wearing the most adorned ensemble I had ever seen. The gold and red stones fastened to her long dress illuminated the space she occupied. Her skin was pure and unblemished. Her eyes were dark, but lively. The women accompanying her did not share the same

countenance. They appeared sad, withdrawn and strangely lifeless in the midst of such exuberance. I wanted to know where they were from. My curiosity got the best of me, as it usually does, so I approached them. With the help of a translator, I introduced myself, bowed slightly with my right hand over my heart to show respect, and politely asked where they were from. I recognized their language; they were speaking Farsi. I imagined they were from a traditional village in the south of Iran, but I had never seen Tehrani women dressed that way. The translator and three women exchanged a few more words. I understood enough of what they were saying to catch on. The three women were inquiring where *I* was from. They pointed at me and then the translator said “E-shoon az Aamricaan” (This person is from America). I looked at them, smiled again gently, and extended my hand towards theirs in a gesture of friendship. Our eyes met, but only briefly. My hand remained untouched. They lowered their heads and began weeping. My new friends were from Kabul, Afghanistan.

I have never been able to articulate the emotions that swept over me at that very moment. I swallowed hard, clenched my jaws and scrambled for the right words to say. I was speechless. For the first time in my life, I understood that war is more than a distant image on a television screen. I understood collective guilt. I understood collective shame. Without thinking any further, I embraced them. I kissed each of their cheeks (an Islamic custom) and apologized for their suffering. I knew my actions were precarious and my words trivial. Nevertheless, I wiped the tears from the eldest’s eyes and repeatedly stated how sorry I was for their anguish.

My driver arrived on time. I told the women (with the help of a translator) that I wanted to see them again. They agreed and over the course of the next few days we found times to meet with one another and talk about our lives. I asked a lot of questions, eager to learn about their history, their culture and their families. Their stories were difficult to comprehend. On one of our last days together and after most of the competitions were over, I learned about the young girl in the adorning dress. The group of women had traveled to Tehran for her. The voyage took them several days and was very dangerous. They told me about hiring private drivers and hiding in the trunks of old and undependable cars. The Taliban threatened to kill them if they caught the women leaving the country in order to participate in the Games. After several days and nights of traveling through the most horrible and frightening conditions, they arrived safely in Tehran. All for Nasrin.

Nasrin was a karate athlete and the Third Muslim Games was her first chance to compete and represent her country. Nasrin, one of thirty Afghan athletes, was part of the first female delegation to compete outside of Afghanistan since 1979. Her family was very proud of her. She had come with high hopes of winning a medal... in special honor of her father. The Taliban murdered him before he *ever* had a chance to see Nasrin compete. The young girl, who just days before looked so innocent, so fragile and so full of hope, now appeared to carry the weight of her family, of her nation, and of a lost dream. She failed to win a medal at the Games and was now faced with the fear and uncertainty of returning to her home in Afghanistan.

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