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Gender Roles and Social Change

Interview of a Man in Leadership

For John Agnelli

**Reza Afshari: Hilarity and Brilliance**

The first class I took with Reza Afshari was Modern China, and I was less than excited. I didn’t know anyone in the class, and I was commuting, nervous, a bit insecure about what the other kids thought of me. I stayed pretty quiet for the first couple classes, unsure how to interact with the man who came to class and told us he hated students, hated faculty, hated staff; the only things he wanted to talk to were the geese, but the dogs kept chasing them away. I knew he was obviously funny, but he seemed so smart and his ideas were so profound, I just didn’t know how to figure him out.

About a month in, Afshari was ranting about how it was so hard to talk to us, because we don’t listen, we’re so useless. He said that he wished there was a place where older people with lots of ideas could go and talk to one another and share ideas and having simulating conversations. I, not using my censor, blurt out, “They already have it, it’s called a nursing home.” The class gasped in horror. I thought I was going to have to transfer again, but Afshari’s face said it all. It was the first real smile I’d seen all semester. We were fast friends after that.

This story is my relationship with Afshari and what has brought me to the place where I see his hilarity and brilliance as one. His ideas are spectacular and his sarcastic, pessimistic humor mixed with the biggest heart on the planet makes the fascinating man that is Reza Afshari.

As I sit in his office and explain what this interview/project is about, he is reprimanding me, in his fashion, and telling me how I’ve picked the wrong person, he does not apply to this, he has not overcome adversity based on gender, etc. I am listening, agreeing, laughing about how I did not handle the topic correctly, but that I am going to wing it like always. HAHA.

What Afshari doesn’t know, is that I have done this on purpose. I’m tired of having the same old, “Women facing adversity in America, rising up and becoming leaders,” discussion. I’m proud of their achievements as a fellow human, but at this point I am tired of the poor American women saga. Try teaching a small girl to read in Afghanistan without getting beaten, that’s a real achievement. But I choose Afshari because I know his passion for human rights, including women’s rights, and I know that his idea of how the world works is so thought out and inspirational, that there was no one better to interview as a leader; because, in retrospect, he may not be leading any exact group, but he has led me.

Reza Afshari was born in Iran and came here as a student immigrant. However, if you ask outright where he’s from, he will tell you, “The history department of Temple University.” I had always wondered about this statement, and thought I had understood it. I hadn’t. Afshari tells me that in his first four years of undergraduate school, whilst his English was still broken, and he was still getting used to America, there were various women who took care of him. He laughs as he says, “I didn’t know if they were girlfriends or they were just hanging around, but they’d show and I would talk about papers for class and they would take care of me.” Alone in this new country, these women provided the love and emotional support that a self-proclaimed, “disturbed” young man needed. His American upbringing was done by those women and professors in the history department of Temple University, who had the empathy to want to help him, and the curiosity to want to know more about this boy from Iran. He laughs and mentions that it was certainly not his good looks that kept them coming around.

His respect for women is so delightfully refreshing, but his hope for their better future is really what is so astounding. If more men wanted to help women, not only reach goals, but be saved from radical discrimination in other countries, the world would no doubt be a better place. He mentions that women in America have overcome class lines, which is a huge part of our successful progression. He says that women here can have fathers that are poor and have undervalued jobs, but they can become doctors and lawyers anyway. This is not the case in other countries.

I decide that I want him to address his own personal adversity, which, of course, is impossible to get out of him without a bit of a run around. He’s humble, above all else. The topic starts out light; he says that when you have an accent in America, you are always conscious of your accent. He laughs as he says that, when you have an accent, people tend to miss the first 10 minutes of your discussion because they’re trying to figure out where you’re from. Afshari then said some of the most inspiring things I had heard in a long time. He said that it may have been hard that he was from a Muslim country, but he can’t allow the accent, the differences, to take over. He said, “You allow yourself to be discriminated.” He says that he does not allow himself to be discriminated against and so he needed to be the best possible. He said when you’re facing discrimination you have two choices. You can close down, become defensive and in turn become radical for a cause instead of making logical points.

‘Or… you have the unique opportunity to redefine yourself. “Don’t look at yourself for what you were, but who you can become.” Things that are ascribed to you, your color, your race, your gender, your religion; they *can* be overcome.’ He works so that he is always changing, “always in transition,” always working to be the person he wants to be, not the person others see him as. He says he wants it so that, “Nobody can define me.” I reply, “Afshari, you have accomplished that.” And he has.

He also talks about how “mainstream can be ugly.” Mainstream America: the people who follow the trends and the tendencies expected of them. Mainstream can be prejudice, sexist, racist, and close minded. But the beauty of America, and in his opinion, specifically New York, is that there is a mainstream and then there are the margins, and the biggest margins are here. He says that “the margins have huge opportunities.” He says that here, the margins are spaces on the side of mainstream society and those spaces are so large that there is room for you to make yourself into something amazing and incredible just in the margin. The margins aren’t so large in other places, he points out. He frequently redefines himself and with so many different margins here in America, you can always be redefining yourself.

He reverts back to his “upbringing” at Temple University and says how university has always been “margin.” That is how he always felt comfortable there. He says with all his sensitivities and craziness and rule breaking that he would not survived anywhere but a university, which is why he is still at one. I can see this now that he has explained it, and I see that often my parents are surprised by how open everything is at Pace, confused at how EVERYTHING is accepted. But they are mainstream and we here at Pace are a beautiful margin.

Afshari says to me, “You know me, you know me, and I could not have physical survived outside a university.” I see him as my role model and can’t imagine him not surviving an Armageddon with that soul of his, but we are kindred spirits, and he has unintentionally arose a new fear in me that I, too, will not be able to survive outside the University setting, making it easier for me to see his point.

Though, when we discuss the movement and how people are changing, he says it simply, “We are in the middle of a great experiment.” He’s not sure how long it has been going or how long it will last, or even if others in the past considered their time period, ‘an experiment,’ but he says, “I am glad to be in this experiment, I have become a better person for being a part of it.”

He says that he doesn’t like the words, “integration” or “assimilation”; he says it sounds like we’re trying to grind up people then mix them together. That’s not what we want. We want people to hold onto what’s important to them. To be the person they are, without changing for others. Afshari says, “I have not *assimilated.* This country has given me the opportunity to *participate.*” What an extraordinary way to put it. He has chosen to participate in America. It sounds so simple and yet so complex. To choose to participate in America and to learn customs, to participate in them, but to not lose ones background, and to be a part of the country, but also to define yourself; that is what our society should embrace. He laughs as he says, “Even though I am weird and crazy, I can participate.” Yes, Afshari; and we are better for it.