

IWA WEX Remarks

Thank you so much, Jackie, for that kind introduction. Thank you to my friend Ethel Gofen, for introducing me to this incredible organization.

Thank you, to the IWA, for this humbling honor recognizing my work for the last 25 years. Some of the other leaders involved in that work are here today, such as my colleagues at Pasfarda Art and Culture Exchange (an organization we formed to increase dialogue between Iranians and Americans through the arts), and the leadership of RefuShe (a Nairobi based NGO that takes in displaced girls fleeing sexual violence and terrorism - as well as the beneficiary of the \$2,500 prize that IWA is generously awarding me today).

Thank you for allowing me to do the work that is so essential to my being.

Most especially, thank you to all of my sisters. My soulmates since birth, Atessa and Mahsa, who came into this world infused into my essence, you dazzle me every day with your light. And my spirit sisters who I've known and loved for years. I am so eternally grateful to you for putting your lives on hold to be here in my support, but even more importantly, for catching me all those times when I fall.

I'm not really sure whether even the most confident among us can feel deserving of the phrase "woman extraordinaire." I certainly don't.

As I thought about this honor, the word "extraordinaire" began to melt away, and the word "woman" began to shine. Then, as I luck would have it, I just happened to be on a girls' night out with some of my dearest friends, when one of them asked, "What was the precise moment when you first felt like a woman?"

What a question.

Yes, aging is gradually progressive, and maturity doesn't happen overnight. But we all have that transformative experience, for some of us much earlier than others, when our worldview shifts and girlhood suddenly feels miles away. That night, women I consider myself very lucky to know, told their metamorphic tales. I realized then the endless boundaries of their courage.

For me, the moment I remember first feeling like a woman was not in my childhood home of Iran, not in Canada, where my family moved to find our future, and not in America, where I ultimately settled.

My womanhood was found in travel.

I was 23 years old, in India, studying comparative constitutional and international human rights law. The moment it happened – my entrance into womanhood – is crystal clear in my mind's eye.

I stepped off a train to thick heat wrapping its arms around me. A group of porters quickly ran to the disembarking passengers, myself included. They were asking to carry our bags, back in the day when suitcases didn't roll on smooth wheels. They competed with one another, throwing the

heavy luggage on their heads or bending forward with several pieces stacked on their backs, for a tip so small it meant nothing to those of us giving it.

A man with leathered skin, a ruffled beard and a red turban came up to me. He seemed too old to have the job which he approached with aggressive enthusiasm. He wore these square shaped glasses, like the kind my father wore. And for a split-second, he looked exactly like my father. If under the duress of exhaustion or hunger, I might've even confused the two. Keen to earn his fee, he hardly gave me the chance to say yes. There was a slight smile, forever etched into my memory, then the suitcase was on his back, and I immediately regretted the hefty law books I had brought along.

As learned as I thought myself to be at the time, the paradox of India's democratic successes juxtaposed against its intense struggles, overwhelmed my young mind. The thing is, I'd found myself in a country full of wealth, sophistication, innovation, and intoxicating beauty. But a country that also has another side to it – the pervasive and undeniable poverty – bearing on its shoulders the weight of *my* bag before *my* very eyes.

India is, in this way, not unlike the very world in which we all live. A world where heroes and villains co-exist. Where disaster sits across the street from triumph.

It occurred to me back on that train platform (and hasn't escaped me ever since) that I could, just as easily, have been that porter's daughter, instead of the daughter of my own father. That I had done nothing to "deserve" the family I was born into. It wasn't because of anything "I" did that as an infant, I arrived into a home full of love, with parents who knew the significance of the highest expressions of who we are, like poetry. There are many who aren't. Mere chance, that I never went hungry during the post-revolutionary chaos and bloody war of my child-hood. There were many who did.

There are truths that seem self-evident when considered for any real length of time. That we ought to value relationships above wealth, give thanks for our health, rise above petty differences with our neighbors to find common ground. While oft repeated, these realities are rarely internalized. We notice them as we would a pretty flower on a walk, then forget them within a moment, retreating back into our bubble of ringing phones, frustrating traffic, unexpected rain, or unfair bosses. We tend to fill our minds more with the immediacy of our troubles and the nag of our to-do tasks than gratitude for our undeserved gifts. Even worst, we forget to observe others not so lucky within the context of the circumstances *they* were born into, and the corresponding impact on their lives. So it is, and must be, that we recognize our successes with our own luck in mind.

And yet... No life is free from struggle.

You, each of you as you sit here today, you *know* you have experienced profound pain. A deep loss or injury that still resonates within you, a battle that left you scarred. The memory of it comes over you from time-to-time, a thick fog on an otherwise pleasant day. Or maybe it's still so fresh that you could reach out and touch it, let it smear on your fingers like wet paint. In either case, you know what it is to suffer. To feel lost. To feel alone.

In so many ways, it's what we do with our *pain* that defines our character. Do we linger in it, allow it to shackle us to empty walls? Or turn our backs on it, denying its existence altogether? Maybe we try to drown it in wine. Or maybe, we belittle our tragedies, angry with ourselves for our melancholy, because after all, most of us in this room are the train's passengers, not its porters.

Now, there are many who would stand before you and preach, by way of inspiring stories, on how it was they found perspective and conquered their traumas.

I will do no such thing. Instead, I urge you to possess it. Seize the pain and make it useful.

The famed poet, *Khalil Gibran*, wrote:

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.

And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears.

And how else can it be?

The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.

Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup that was burned in the potter's oven?

And is not the lute that soothes your spirit, the very wood that was hollowed with knives?

When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.

When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.

To understand the truths of Gibran's words, is to truly begin to live.

I stand before you today *because* I was burned in a potter's oven and hollowed with knives.

I stand *humbly*, because I *know* that you were too.

It is, in this way, useless to ask who faced a hotter oven or a sharper knife. Some swim the agony of defeat, while some spasm at the memory of wounds they caused others.

I have submitted to fears. Denied them, too. Felt disdain for my own misery. I have fallen and disappointed myself more times than I can count. Worse than that, there are times in my life when I caused pain to others, even if never by intention.

But in these truths, too, there *can* be dignity. To err is to personify humanity. Ethics compel us to grieve for our mistaken selves. But then, we must rise. Aspire to not only *do* better but to *be* better. What does this mean? Age-old notions, really.

Dignity. Integrity. Thirst for Knowledge. Compassion. Gratitude. Love.

And the recognition that what burns the hottest is not the stings of others, but the fog of our own ignorance. The untruths we tell ourselves about the world – about our sisters and our brothers.

But from those ashes too, we can rise. For the virtues of a better self are not inherently born, but milestones to aspire to, struggle with, and be inspired by.

Nothing less than this struggle will shed light on our depths, or use the voids that pain left behind to compose the music of lutes.

Sometimes the path to awareness appears before us with ease. Other times, we take the long road around. One thing I can say for certain – everyone gathered here today is on that path.

A dear friend, who is here today, once told me that so much of what matters in life is “about the conversation.” He said, “its *all* about the conversation.”

In this room, among all of you, there are representatives of over *sixty* different countries, breaking bread together. Assembled today, right here, are Sikhs, Muslims, Hindus, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, and atheists. Native tongues include English, Spanish, Polish, Arabic, Tagalog, Chinese, Serbian, Persian, French, Portuguese, German, Japanese, Korean, Turkish, and Hindi, to name some. The age range is from 5 to 87.

This is the extraordinary gift of International Women Associates. Their work brings travel *to* us. What magic does it take to create such a gathering? What exchanges can happen – perhaps already have happened – here today, between people from very different backgrounds, gathered not in response to politics or as a component of diplomacy, but to simply know and learn about and from one another. To celebrate each other.

I want to tell Lin-Manuel Miranda and Alexander Hamilton to move aside because, this right here, *this is the room where it happens!*

In this room are my parents. My mother, Nahid. My father, Amir. Could you please stand for a moment ... They're right there, in case anyone wants to go up to them afterwards and shake their hands. Thank you for showing me, by the example of your outstanding characters, what dignity looks like. Your love was, and remains to this day, the blanket I wrap myself in whenever I'm cold with sorrow.

Seated at the same table as my Iranian-Canadian parents are my American in laws. My parents by marriage. Vicki flew from across the country to be here today, Joe sponsored a table to support me, and Kristin always has my back.

In this room are three of my children (the little one was too young to be allowed to come), not only are they an amalgam of three different cultural and national traditions: American-Canadian-Iranian – but they're also the product of a mixed-political house (half republican, half democrat – you never see that anymore!) What really produced those children, is a love affair, between two people born on opposite sides of the globe.

My Stuart. Can you please stand for a moment and be recognized? How can I possibly ever thank you enough for your unending support and unconditional love? You've always believed in my craziest of dreams – from writing a novel while still working full time – to building a performance stage in our basement. And when I sometimes forgot what I was working for or why I was so tired, you'd remind me. Not counting my father, you are the greatest man I have ever known. And I will adore you forever.

My family's diversity feels at home today, in this room.

Please don't doubt for a second that being here – engaging in the conversation with those whose pasts, ethnicities, languages, and opinions are very different from our own – emerging from the insulated bubble of like-minded people we often find ourselves in, this is a substantial component of *the work*. *Your* work, just by being present. The place of action is and always shall be the place of dialogue.

Here it begins. Here it continues. And I believe, here is where it can end.

Here, we stand together. Stand in recognition of the burden – the *daily obligation* – to remember that porter on the train platform. That luck of the draw. We know that we must rise to take the arms of those who cannot, to stand for them, and then, even through the sad songs of violins, to sway with them.

In these efforts, many setbacks and failures will sting us, to be sure. But we shall never resign. There's a Talmud quote that speaks to this:

“Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly now. Love mercy now. Walk humbly now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it.”

We as women were born from that place where the pain lies and found the way to be born again. Herein lies the coexistence of heroes and villains. Of the triumphs and disasters that fill the same well. Herein lies the refusal to resign. And next to that stubbornness, sits the truth that, the old porter may have far more depth in his center than I do, and that standing for tired old men does not entitle me to this platform. Being given the opportunity is, rather, a privilege.

I invite you all to think of the first moment you emerged out of your childhoods. Think of it now, if you can. Maybe it was a moment of delight. Or maybe, it was one of despair. Regardless, you can feel your power in that rebirth. The next time you fail, or are overcome with sadness, tap into the strength of that transcendence. The moment that taught you to shape the cuts within into something splendid ... into the extraordinary *you*.

Thank you all, for being here, and for allowing me to address you this afternoon. It has been my honor.

By *Shermin Kruse*
Author of [*Butterfly Stitching*](#)