



## Welcome to issue no. 9

Greetings from Art in Action, which has faced challenging start-up conditions due to weeks of rain. Nevertheless, the show is fantastic. I hope you will enjoy reading the three quite 'gritty' articles here: students telling their stories and sharing their work.

Have a look at the website [Schoolinsight](#) for:

- New photos of the Cyprus School,
- New composers page – listen to MP3 clips of their music, and
- Sign-up form and back issues.
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With very best wishes,

**Christine Lambie**

***Escape from dangerous revolutionary Iran is just one part of Mariam Safinia's journey – she now heads the School in San Francisco.***

## Three Continents, Three Careers Mariam Safinia, California

**First Tehran:** I was born and raised in Tehran, Iran until the age of 14. Two years at university in the US and marriage at a young age brought me back to England where my husband was finishing his professional training. We lived in Newcastle for four years where I earned a degree and worked as an architect. Our first child was born there and her arrival motivated us to return to Iran.

My husband was appointed sub-Dean of the Dental School of the National University and began his private practice. I started to teach at the same University. Those were wonderful years. Surrounded and supported by a well-respected family, we were a popular, professional couple. We had another child, built a beautiful home and enjoyed a lively and international social life. There was nothing

on the horizon to warn us that our idyllic life would soon come to an abrupt end. I think of those carefree, first 35 years as Act One in the play of my life.



## Then London

1978 The Iranian Revolution shattered families - we were the lucky ones. My mother-in-law spent three and a half terrifying months in prison because she had been a Member of Parliament during the time of the Shah. My mother ended up alone living in Paris, my sister and brother in the US. Many of our friends were imprisoned; several were executed. There were general strikes, burning of banks and riots in the streets and then rationing, schools closing, shootings in the street and heated political discussions everywhere. People would climb on their roofs to listen to shouts of 'Allah Akbar' (God is Great) as night fell; martial law meant no one could be out in the streets after dusk.

After three failed attempts to leave, our two young daughters and I finally boarded a plane bound for London in January 1979, leaving behind husband, home and a nation in the turmoil of a revolution. Finally my husband managed to join us in London. We quickly concluded that we had to turn our backs on the comfort and ease of our life in Iran so our daughters could grow up in a free society.

Years passed. We gradually rebuilt our lives. My husband's practice was successful and I started an estate agency in central London. In 1989, I began to look for something to occupy my evenings. I spotted a small ad for a course in Practical Philosophy.

I remember the very first night of Part One. I sat in the middle of the front row with pen & pad at the ready, full of judgment about a course where the teacher read from his notes! Ten minutes into the class, I stopped taking notes and started to listen. After we practised the Exercise, I became aware of the din in my head. I wished I could unscrew my head and be free from that incessant noise. I had found what I had been searching for.

A few months later, I was diagnosed with cancer. During the year-long treatment, the lessons learned in School often came to my help; I practised the exercise faithfully and realized that while the doctors could buy my body some time, the real responsibility for healing was mine. Forgiveness, simplicity, harmony, sincerity, gratitude, mending broken relationships and many, many meetings with my wonderful tutors followed on from this realization. Looking back, cancer was a great teacher; and the awakening it brought about is a most wonderful gift.

## Now San Francisco

We had become grandparents to a delightful little boy who lived far away from us in California. In 2003 after my husband had retired from his practice and I was also ready to hand over the reins of my business, we made the decision to move to the US.

The only reservation for me was the loss of the School and the teaching. I spoke about this with my tutor who simply said, "Why don't you start a school there?" The seed was planted.

The first Part One class was offered in San Francisco early in October 2004. We lived 40 miles away; I loaded the car with kettles, tea & coffee, paper plates and cups, cookies and fruit, flyers and hand-outs and headed to the city not knowing whether even one person would turn up. 14 people came on that first night, mostly friends to 'support' me.

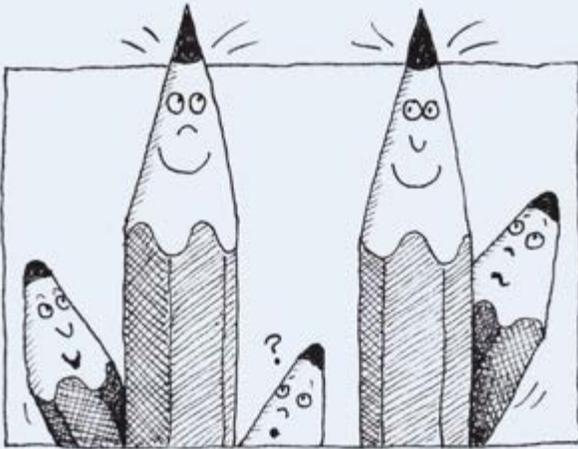
Word about the course got out to the Iranian community in the Bay Area; there were requests for me to offer Practical Philosophy in other cities. Within a few months, I was tutoring in four different locations, driving 350 miles each week between them.

Around that time, I became unwell and was told by doctors not to drive for a few months! My husband volunteered to take over the driving, attending every one of 6 classes I tutored each week! After resisting for so long, he became totally immersed in Practical Philosophy. He now maintains that PP and in particular meditation saved his life and helped him recover speedily from coronary bypass surgery.

Our present center is in Pleasanton, California; we have around 120 students and 5 tutors. Many of our students are Iranian Americans; word of mouth is our only advertising. My husband and I are enjoying the best years of our lives with the fine company of our students and the guidance of the teaching. Life is

indeed perfect.

We extend an invitation to anyone in the San Francisco Bay Area to visit us. Meanwhile you can check out The School of Practical Philosophy in California on [SPPCalifornia](#)



## Top Tips - items recommended by readers

1. **To read:** *Heaven on Earth* by Sadakat Kadri. Sharia law is a major force in the world. 1400 years after the Prophet, interpreters are still arguing over what Sharia means. For anyone wishing to understand more about it, this is a good introduction through Islam's past and present.
2. **3D printing:** Is this the future of manufacturing? Lisa Harouni gives an introduction to this fascinating way of making things. Go to [TEDHarouni](#)
3. **Debt:** Confused about debt? How much is a trillion anyway? When numbers get to a certain size, the mind needs the help of diagrams. Have a look at [Infodebt](#)
4. **Philosophy café:** This movement started with Marc Sautet in Paris, who started the Café Philosophique in 1992. For a translation of the webpage go to [Philocafe](#). Inspired by the French model, Christopher Phillips started a similar movement called Socrates Café, go to [SocCafe](#).



*As the global economic crisis unfolded, London students Ross and Megan Ashcroft realized the story had to be told. Their revealing documentary, **Four Horsemen**, was released in March and has been selected for 15 international festivals.*

## Four Horsemen Ross and Megan Ashcroft, London

### What inspired you to make the film?

**RA:** When you are watching the biggest heist in human history you have two choices – sit there and moan or get up and do something. In 2007 we understood that there was something badly wrong with the global economy and that many of the marginalised thinkers and economists needed to be heard. So the logical progression to launching the Renegade Economist website was to make a feature documentary which tied many seemingly disparate issues into one narrative.

**MA:** After working in financial services and banking for over a decade I began to realise that there was something profoundly wrong with the system. The underlying practices and incentives were/are not only unsustainable but, as we are seeing, have a corrosive effect on society. When you come to that realisation you are left with a choice – keep perpetuating a system you don't believe in or bow out and begin to rethink how you go about your life. In 2007 I chose the latter and we began making *Four Horsemen*.

### What is the film about?

**RA:** Four Horsemen is an independent documentary that lifts the lid on how the world really works. The film reveals fundamental flaws in our economic system which have pushed civilization to the brink of disaster. Solutions to the multiple crises facing humanity have never been more urgent, but equally, the conditions for change have never been more favourable.

### **How big a job is it to make a film of this length?**

**RA:** The film took about three years to make. We had to make it so the issues we raise are timeless and not reactions to the ceaseless vacillations of the Great Financial Crash. We didn't have the luxury of a research team so we had to do the reading ourselves. That took considerable time but we had to get it right.

### **Was this a spare time project?**

**MA:** No it wasn't - I left The City to do this. We set about initially creating a platform for the marginalised economic commentators and thinkers on the Renegade Economist website. Then we realised there was an appetite for a wider story and we embarked on the film.

### **Did it take over your lives?**

**RA:** You have to find the right measure but yes, this was all-consuming. It's very difficult to switch off when you are in the middle of making a film especially when the global story was unfolding. It took further discipline not to wade into dinner party conversations when people triumphantly stated that ever-increasing house prices are a good thing. That was very frustrating.

### **What led you to this point of view? Do you have a background in economics?**

**MA:** Not one of the crew who made Four Horsemen is an academic 'economist'. I think this was an advantage. We had to find the story by asking the questions that most of us would want to ask but can't. Every new interview opened another door to more questions so the editing process was relentless.

### **What obstacles did you overcome to complete this project?**

**MA:** The big lesson from a producer's point of view was to ensure we served the vision of the film and not allow anyone to become bigger than the project or the team. The other big obstacle was funding - no mainstream broadcasters would provide financing so we had to fund it ourselves. The good thing about this was that we retained total editorial control - we didn't have to go 'upstairs' for sign-off.

### **How on earth did you manage to get those high-profile interviews?**

**RA:** Tenacity, patience and personal contacts. Our interviewees are all incredibly busy so we had to slot into their diaries, wherever they were in the world. Often we would only be given an hour but regularly we overran because they wanted to talk long-form instead of vox-pops and standard media responses. We had a duty of care to serve their words properly, not to twist them to our own ends.

### **Has the School's economics course influenced your views?**

**RA:** The School wants decent economics for the world – as do we. The bookshop was a treasure-trove which has influenced my thinking over many years. Only now is the realisation beginning to dawn that that true human liberty will not be achieved until the economic system is constructed on firm moral foundations, instead of an ill-considered, self-serving ideology. The School of Economic Science has been saying this for decades.

### **How much was this a husband and wife project - how did this work for you both?**

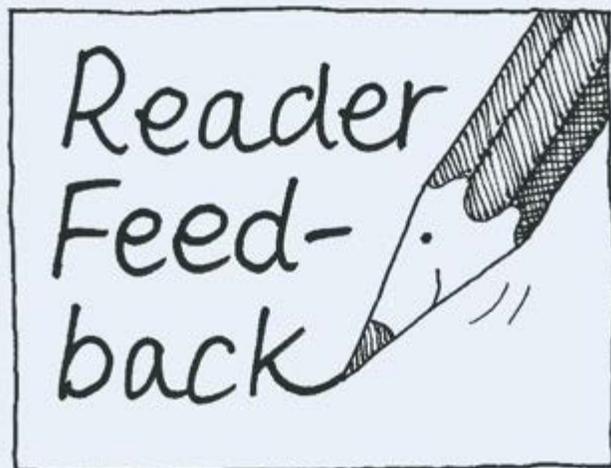
**MA:** Well, we married whilst we were making the film so it seems to be working. The key thing is that Ross and I have different skills which are complementary. I think this is an important element in any partnership - marriage or business. We do have to make more of an effort to leave work at work, especially as our flat has become a hostel to independent filmmakers passing through or shooting in London.

### **What's next?**

**RA:** Lots of people have asked for a sequel so... Four Horsemen: The Blueprint. We are also working on a comedy.

**MA:** A holiday!

First watch the trailer at: [4Horsemen](#). Click on screenings to arrange one, or click on merchandise to buy the film.



## Reader Feedback

*I very much enjoyed reading this issue [No 8] from beginning to end. I have found the "Beauty is truth" article very moving and particularly uplifting, "The Art in Action Feeling" thoroughly entertaining and Amanda Pope's "SWAN" most practical and inspiring! Thank you very much, and for the opportunity, to share it! I have just the person in mind! **Auckland, NZ***

*I loved reading Ron Leaton's story. I was considering this same question about truth, beauty and heroism. He is a great example. **New York***

*We use the Meditation Insight Timer app at the secondary Catholic School in Brighton where I work. It's a beautiful sound. We meditate for 10 mins at first break on Tuesday & Thursday and are trying to encourage more staff to attend. **Brighton, UK***



**Major Roberts has been in the British army for more than 20 years and has been on operational service in 23 countries. Throughout this time he has attended philosophy groups when possible.**

## Army Life Ben Roberts, London

From a very young age I had a simple conviction: I wanted to serve my country. So by the age of 16, I was signed up with an Army Scholarship and a Regular Commission.

In due course I joined the Royal Green Jackets. At the heart of this new regiment was an essential humanity, focusing on mutual respect, encouragement, self-discipline, and the expectation of intelligent independent action at all levels. This philosophy lies at the core of our regiment to this day, and continues to account for our operational effectiveness.

As an officer in the Royal Green Jackets, (Rifles, as it became known in 2007) the last 20 years have been a busy period for the British Army. During this time I have been on operational service in Northern Ireland, Bosnia, Kosovo, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq and elsewhere. And there has always been space in my Bergen (backpack) for some small book for spiritual company.

## Iraq

Recently, one of my roles was as Second In Command of a Battalion of 600 Infantry on operations in Iraq in

2009, based for part of the tour in Al Qurnah, at the junction of the Tigris and Euphrates, 70 km north of Basra. Our role was to support the fledgling Iraqi Army as they re-established security and stability in the region.

Specifically, I was responsible for mentoring the Iraqi Battalion Commanding Officer, whose area of responsibility extended across Al Qurnah and out to the Marsh Arabs to the North West. This was the first major operation they had undertaken since the invasion of 2003, and its purpose was to drive Muqtada al Sadr's Mahdi Army militia out of the city of Basra and its environs.

Resistance was unexpectedly stiff however, and after 6 days of intensive fighting and over 1000 casualties, decisive US intervention was required to stabilize the situation. Besides the US troops, an additional Iraqi Division was brought in and remained in place.

It was fascinating to watch a country try to restore the habit of social responsibility and selfless commitment that we all too often take for granted. It was apparent, for instance, that the significant funds available from Central Government for utilities and waste management never achieved an effective solution on the ground, because it was generally understood that, when in post, local ministers would syphon off their own personal fortune whilst the opportunity presented itself!

## Meditation

We were based in a camp adjacent to one of Saddam's compounds. It had been used during his tenure to exact his brutal intent on the locals, including the oppression of the Marsh Arabs, and had often been the scene of torture and abuse.

In such unfortunate surroundings, in a town riddled with the physical and emotional scars of years of conflict, it was reassuring to connect with something more fundamental and universal. Often, after my evening rounds, culminating with an inspection of our machine gun sentry on top of Saddam's compound, I would stay out on the roof-top in the twilight overlooking the Euphrates, far above the rumble of the town and the barking dogs and meditate in the company of sand and stars. The timeless simplicity and cleansing harmony of these forces of nature offered to wash away the human troubles of the place.

I can picture now my interpreter walking round and round on the heli-pad far below in the dusk, pulling at his prayer beads and muttering. He had much to pray for. His family had been repeatedly threatened and attacked on account of his work, and his application for asylum in the UK was pending.

Similarly, the laundry man who arrived twice a week beaming from ear to ear, whose father had been murdered for aiding the coalition; and yet he had chosen to step straight into the breach to continue the work. He wasn't doing the laundry: he was building a temple of his country's future. But for the determination of these brave men and others like them, we could have achieved little.

## Pakistan

My tour in Pakistan in 2007 provided another fascinating insight into a troubled state. Suicide bombers, internecine strife, covert insurgency were all part of the myriad manifestations of the instability of this young and insecure nation. In contrast was its rich cultural heritage.

Not far from where I was based at Islamabad, lies the town of Taxila where I encountered the intriguing confluence of Indian, Buddhist, Classical, and Islamic traditions. Most notable was the Gandharan Buddhist Head and its arresting tranquillity. I was transfixed for what seemed an eternity, bathing in its serenity.

What struck me at Taxila was the rich spiritual roots, from which the country seemed quite cut off. Although some of the Pakistani officers I met echoed that serene nobility; with the general round of suicide attacks and political assassinations it was as if the wounds of partition still reverberated too violently for the country to recognise its own source.

## And now?

As it happens, my time with the Regular force is drawing to a close. The Army continues necessarily to reduce in size. Very recently I learned that I am on the list for redundancy in June 2013. So our formal relationship will end soon, but the individual bonds of friendship will of course endure.

The Army has been quite simply an outstanding employer: tough, demanding and rewarding in equal measure. It has provided an opportunity for service in the finest company, an opportunity for which I will always feel profoundly grateful. I look forward very much, and with interest, to see what fate lies ahead. See photos of British Troops patrolling Al Qurnah and the Garden of Eden; the photo-journalist was at Ben's outstation. Go to [AlQurnah](#)

## Thanks for reading

Subscribe Free – click on the link below to sign up.

Please keep that feedback coming. I need all your suggestions of personal stories, insights, links, articles, cartoons, video clips – anything that will be of interest to our philosophy community. Do you know someone in the School who has an interesting story to tell? E-mail me at: [editor@seslondon.org](mailto:editor@seslondon.org). Thanks again for reading, CL

The views expressed in this document are not necessarily those of the Fellowship of the School of Economic Science

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