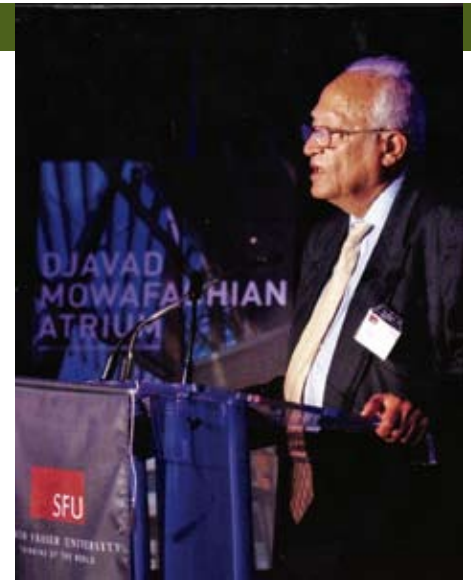




Abraham Tahsili

A Miracle Brings Us Here This Evening



Iranian philanthropist Djavad Mowafaghian immigrated to Canada almost 2 decades ago.

Through the Djavad Mowafaghian Foundation, he donated \$6 million to BC Children's Hospital, \$5.5 million to Simon Fraser University, and several smaller amounts to various organizations.

He has built so many schools in Iran for handicapped and less fortunate children; the capacity of his schools is now 32,000 students. On September 15, 2008, Simon Fraser University held a reception in his honour, attended by university staff, business associates, lawyers, engineers, bankers, and friends.

Because Abraham Tahsili was his childhood friend and schoolmate, SFU invited Abraham to introduce Mr. Mowafaghian to the audience. Here is an excerpt from his address.

Before any one of you was born, 67 years ago Djavad Mowafaghian and I were teenagers and schoolmates in Tehran.



Djavad Mowafaghian with Dr. Michael Stevenson, President and Vice Chancellor of SFU

There was a basketball court in our school. The one ball was normally kept in the office but it belonged to the school team and we had no right to touch it. Around the yard were many oak trees. We would find an acorn and use it as a ball. None of our families could afford a ball.

Our school was almost 10 kilometres away from our homes. Our parents gave us a few coins for bus fare.

We would save the coins to use for a dream that came true every other week—a visit to the movie theatre to watch silent movies such as the Charlie Chaplin series or *Invaders from Mars*,

and enjoy a sandwich. As children, we were given 50 percent discounts on movie tickets and sandwiches.

Djavad had lost his father when he was a year old. He was brought up by his mother, whom I like to call an Incarnate Guardian Angel. Although very beautiful and very young when she became a widow, she decided to live as a single parent and look after her children. That was a difficult task in those days, but she did a perfect job.

After Djavad finished his education, he began to work on odd jobs. He wasn't happy until he decided to establish his own construction

company. The only capital he had was great willpower to succeed.

In the beginning, his company received only a few small orders. His financial state was so bad, he and his associates were not able to afford a decent meal. Djavad's hard work and perseverance enabled him to rise to the highest echelon of wealth and power that is attainable by an entrepreneur.

To protect ourselves when we are rich, it is our natural inclination to encapsulate ourselves with our family and a few trusted friends in a close circle of love. It was only the pure love and nonstop teaching of his Angel of a mother that enabled him to break through that barrier and expand his love and generosity to an international arena—and reach the destitute, regardless of nationality, race, and faith.

Through her inherent virtue, she taught her children these truths.

- You can not assure happiness for yourself unless you provide others with happiness.
- You should love everybody, unconditionally, instead of desiring to be loved.
- Be kind to the unkind.

Almost 30 years ago, due to a political upheaval, many families left Iran and now reside in different parts of the world. Djavad and his family went to Geneva, Switzerland, and my family and I came to North Vancouver.

For almost 8 years, we lost track of each other, until one day a miracle happened.

Before I give you the full details, I want to borrow three words from Albert Einstein. When he was asked what his religion was, he said,

Try to penetrate, with our limited means, the secrets of nature. There you will find that behind all discernible laws and connections there is something subtle, intangible, and inexplicable. Veneration of this force beyond all we can comprehend is my religion. To that extent, in fact, I am religious.

The three words I have borrowed are Subtle, Intangible, and Inexplicable. They vividly exist in this miracle.

The three words I have borrowed are Subtle, Intangible, and Inexplicable.

One evening 22 years ago when I arrived home, my wife asked if I had bought cheese. I had not. She said, "You know we have guests tonight and we need cheese."

It was exactly 2 minutes after 7 PM. I called a deli on Lonsdale in North Vancouver where we bought groceries. When the manager answered the phone, I asked when he would be closing for the night. "I was going to close now. Why?"

I asked him to wait a few minutes more, and said I needed his help badly. He said he would wait for me.

I drove to the deli and bought the cheese. After paying, I said, "Thank you very much." He said, "It is I who should thank you, and not you to thank me."

I asked why.

He said, "You made me wait 10 minutes more than usual, during which time I arranged all the advertisements for *The Keyhan*." *The Keyhan* is an international newspaper, published in London England.

I said, "I did not know you are representing *The Keyhan*."

"Yes, I do," he said. "Do you want to put an ad in it?"

Honestly, I did not have anything to offer to subscribers of that paper around the world, but because he was kind and had waited for me, I could not say no.

"Okay," I said. I took a pen and wrote, "For information about Canada, please contact me." I included my telephone number and my name. That ad was smaller than half my finger and was placed in only one issue of the paper.

By a miracle, that issue made its way to Geneva. Djavad was a subscriber to *The Keyhan*. In that 40-page newspaper, my tiny little ad attracted his attention and he called me.

I invited him to come to Canada. I gave him a tour around Greater Vancouver and he loved this city. I asked him to emigrate to Canada and he did. His emigration was a blessing to many local organizations, due to his philanthropic deeds, and also to my family.



Abraham, his wife Minu, and Djavad Mowafaghian



Abraham and his grandson Pasha



Abraham's daughter Arya (at right), her husband Hamid, and their daughter Abrisham

We often enjoy an evening of backgammon together. He is the only person in the whole world I dare play backgammon with and cheat and, during those intimate times, we talk about our childhood, family, sport, elections, books—you name it.

He is the only person in the whole world I dare play backgammon with and cheat...

My beautiful daughter Arya met his gorgeous nephew Hamid Eshghi, who are both sitting here this evening. They fell in love and were married. From this happy marriage, we have two beautiful grandchildren: A girl in McGill University and a boy in high school here.

Throughout history, honourable academics like you have given people like me homework. Thank you. Today it is going to be vice versa, I am going to give you homework.

Your homework is this: Whenever you have time—when you are exercising, walking, or whenever you like—think about the odds of that miracle coming to pass. After 22 years, the odds grow and grow and grow.

As Einstein said, "Veneration of this force is my religion." I believe this force, as he called it, planned a rendezvous with destiny for Djavaad, through that tiny advertisement, to be here tonight. I believe the true host of this gathering is that force.

This morning, I came across a poem from the 19th century American poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Because I believe philanthropy is a virtue that is contagious, I finish by reading a verse from this poem.

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time. ▲

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