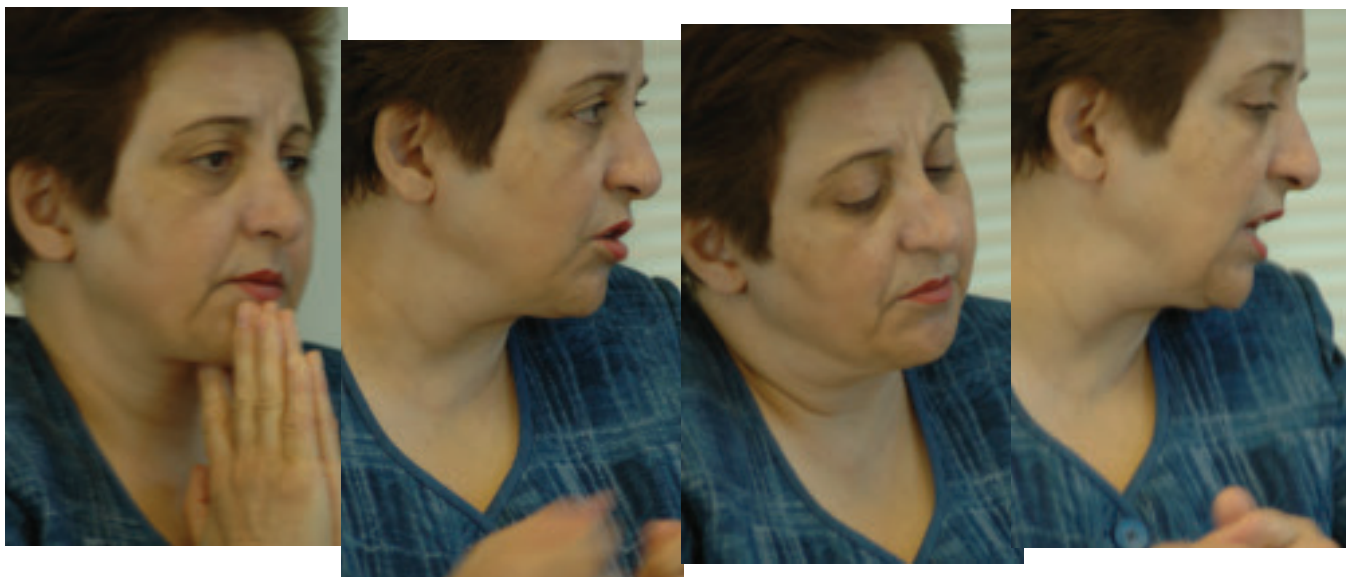


interview: Shirin Ebadi, Iranian human rights activist

“In my life justice has the highest value.”

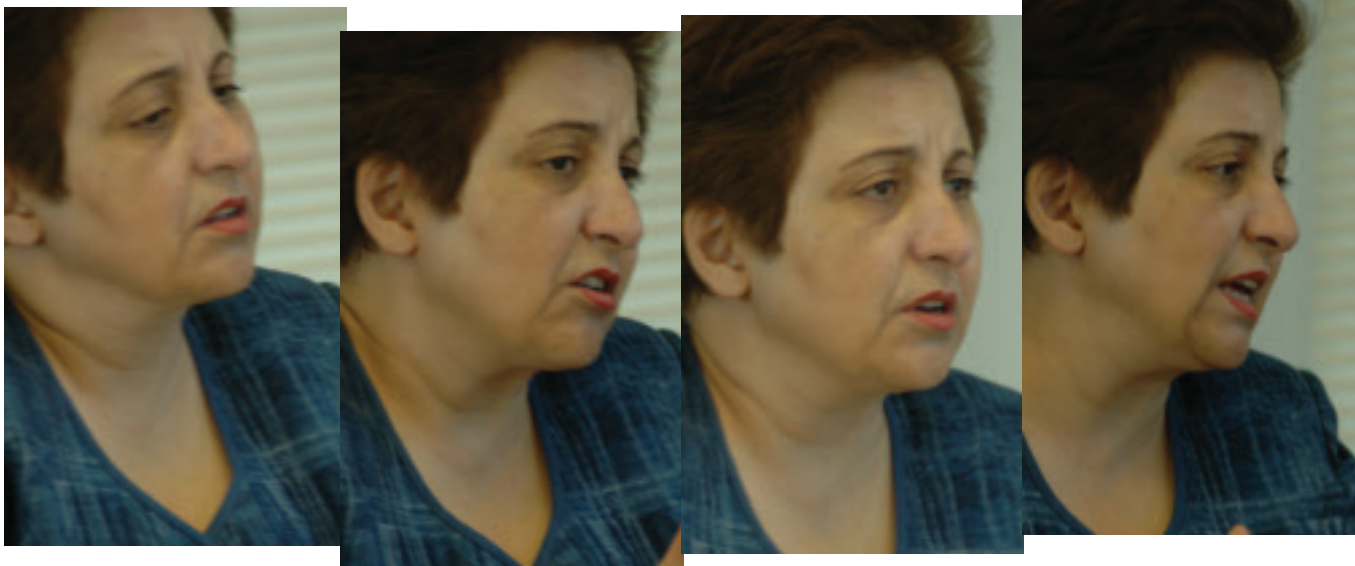


Shirin Ebadi, an Iranian attorney and human rights activist, was awarded an honorary degree at Trinity’s Commencement this year. During her visit to campus, she was interviewed by Joan Hedrick, Charles A. Dana Professor of History, whose biography of Harriet Beecher Stowe won a Pulitzer Prize in 1996. Ebadi spoke through a translator.

She is the first woman in the history of Iran to serve as a judge, the first Moslem woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize, an attorney who has represented Iranian political dissidents, and an internationally acclaimed advocate for human rights. She was a judge on the Tehran City Court until 1979, when the Islamic Revolution dismissed her and other women judges on the grounds that Islam forbids females to serve in that capacity. In 1992, she regained her lawyer’s license and has since represented victims of government oppression and their families. Her books include *The History and Documentation of Human Rights in Iran*, *The Rights of Women*, and *The Rights of the Child*, and *Iran Awakening: A Memoir of Revolution and Hope*. In 2001, she received Norway’s distinguished Rafto Prize in recognition of her activities on behalf of democracy and human rights. In 2003, she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, the highest possible recognition for a lifetime of dedication to the cause of human freedom.

**You lived through the revolution of 1979 and the very difficult years of the Iran-Iraq War fiercely committed to staying in your homeland. What qualities do you most love about your country?**

Iran is my country. Of course it has problems as well, and life is not very easy there. But I am not willing to leave. I look at my homeland as a sick mother. If you have a sick mother, would you leave her on the street, or would you try to get treatment for her? I compare Iran to a mother who has



become ill and old, and I think it is my duty to try to treat her and get her well as best as I can. This is my motivation for staying.

**As a practicing Muslim, one of your core beliefs is that Islam is compatible with democracy and equality. You write, “It is not religion that binds women, but the selective dictates of those who wish them cloistered.” Why are Islam and democracy so often thought to be opposed?**

The different conditions of women in various Islamic countries proves my point. In a country like Saudi Arabia, women cannot even drive, let alone have social and political activities. But in countries like Indonesia, Bangladesh, and Pakistan, as of 15 years ago, women have become prime ministers and presidents. Therefore, the real question is which Islam and which interpretation of Islam.

**Your recently published book, *Iran Awakening*, is subtitled “A Memoir of Revolution and Hope.” Tell us about the hope.**

The day I lose hope for the betterment of conditions, then I will not be able to work. Have you ever heard of a runner who enters a race knowing he will lose? When I talk of hope, I mean hope for the future. Iran has the potential for a great deal of progress. It is very rich. It has many resources: the second largest reservoir of oil, uranium mines—and the geologists say that Iran’s uranium is the best in the world—copper, gold. But most importantly, the majority of the population of Iran is young. Seventy percent of the population of Iran is under 30.

**You describe your childhood as one in which your parents made no distinction between you and your brother. Both sexes were treated alike. How important was this to your development and to your sense of justice?**

It was very important. You will not learn something unless you see it. If no one is kind to you or has love for you, you will not learn to love. Fortunately, from early childhood, I grew up with justice. And in my life, justice has the highest value.

**Were there other forces that drew you into human rights work?**

In the development of one’s personality there are many elements that are important, not just one. My family was very influential, very important, but also my field of study had a lot to do with it. My religious beliefs were also important, as was the political condition of Iran. In a few months, all the laws there changed, and very prejudicial and bad conditions prevailed. A large number of our young people were unfortunately executed and a large number went to jail because they could not be indifferent to injustice. People who believed in justice could not remain quiet.

**Your memoir contains many powerful stories. Is story-telling a particularly effective tool for arousing public opinion? How important is the role of imagination in working for social justice?**

Concepts like justice, love, and pain are not describable. You can never explain what pain is exactly. You can only show where it hurts. You can, for example, say “My head aches.” But you cannot say exactly how it hurts.

Justice is something like that. By telling these stories, I wanted to familiarize readers with the concepts of justice and injustice. No matter how you describe justice, the description will always be incomplete because it is a concept that changes. It may be one way today and another way next week. Therefore, when I tell stories about my cases, my aim is to bring readers to a higher level, to describe a more advanced concept.

**You knew you would not be able to tell your story in Iran because of government censorship. You did not expect to have to fight a battle in the United States in order to publish it here. What was that about?**

In Iran, any book that is to be published needs the government's permission, and if this book was presented to the government, it would not get permission. So I decided to get it published in the United States. But here, they told me I could not publish because there is a sanction on Iran and that the money I would get from the book would be covered under the sanction. I responded that by doing this, they are in fact censoring the people of America. In publishing this book, I wanted to give information to the people of the United States. By preventing publication they are preventing this information from reaching its audience, and this is against the Constitution of the United States.

My publisher said that he could get special permission for me because I am a Nobel Prize winner, but I did not accept. He said I could publish it outside the United States and then bring it into the country and sell it here. I did not accept. Instead, I asked him to find a lawyer for me so we could take the case to the courts. Fortunately, a very good attorney accepted this case pro bono, and we won the case. And because of my case, cultural sanctions were not only lifted from all of the people of Iran, but also the people of Sudan and Cuba. Some of the Cuban writers sent me flowers!

I live with the principles that I believe in. The most important one of all is freedom of speech. I have battled against censorship in Iran for many years, and this belief caused me to go to the courts here in this country. I am of course very happy that courts here are independent and have nothing to do with politics!

**You have been honored by a number of colleges and universities in the United States in the past few years and have also taught at a few universities for several weeks. What is your impression of young people in the United States? Are they as concerned about freedom and civil liberties as young people in Iran?**

I have found American youth very eager to learn. They are eager to learn things that the news media here do not usually report. When I tell them things that are often not reported in the news here, I see how interested they become, and this is very hopeful and encouraging because it shows a society that is dynamic.

Iranian youth talk more and are more informed about freedom than the young people here. The reason is very natural—you know everything by knowing the opposite. When there is a lot of oxygen in the air, you never think about whether you need oxygen and what will happen if it is gone. But if the oxygen is diminished and you start coughing, then everyone will start thinking about how to get more of it. This is why the young people in Iran think so much about freedom and talk more about it.

**At Trinity, where we have one of the few human rights programs in the United States, what do you think we need to do to make these ideas and issues more accessible to our young people?**

The most important thing is that the bad news of the world should be brought to your students. I feel that often in the United States, people do not want to report bad news. The most important thing for a student of human rights is knowledge of bad situations around the world. The world will not change unless the United States becomes better, and the United States will not become better unless its young people become more aware. For example, young people here should be made aware that the United States has the highest budget deficit in the world. Every year, \$320 billion is paid in interest for the government loans, while only \$6 billion is spent on education. The people of this country should ask themselves why the government is in such debt.

**You make the point that there were arms dealers, including the United States, during the Iran-Iraq War who sold arms to both sides. To what extent is profit from oil and arms driving U.S. policy in the Middle East?**

The reason the United States attacked Iraq was that it had weapons of mass destruction, but when they went and searched everywhere, they found that there were no such things. Then the United States said it attacked Iraq for democracy. But I have a question. Is Saddam the only dictator in the world? Unfortunately, the world is full of dictators. The only difference between Saddam and the others is that there is oil in Iraq and there is no oil in other countries. If the United States is searching for dictators, I can show them others! My colleague, Aung San Suu Kyi, has been under house arrest for many years, and the Burmese government has not responded to any international objections. By using this example, I do not mean that you should attack Burma tomorrow. Democracy never comes with bombs. But I mean that the world is full of dictators, and I want to take advantage of this situation as an advocate of human rights to once more object to Aung San Suu Kyi's arrest and imprisonment.

**What forces are guiding international policy in Iran today?**

Like everywhere else in the world, money. And abuse of the religious beliefs of the people.

**You have called for more cultural exchange between Iran and the United States. Are there institutions and channels in which this is happening?**

Any book that is translated into Persian and any Persian book that is translated into English helps in this way. Any student who comes here is important. Wherever there is a department of Iranian studies or where Iranian studies are taught, that is important.

People in the United States do not know much about Iran. For example, people in the United States think there is much injustice towards women, which of course is true. But a coin has two sides. Iran is also a country where more than 65 percent of its university students are women. It is a society where women are more educated than men. Women in Iran were in the parliament even before women in Switzerland. One of my goals in publishing my memoirs was to help the people of the United States know the people of Iran.

**After you received the Nobel Peace Prize, you were greeted in Iran by an extraordinary crowd of well-wishers, many of them women. One of them held a sign that said, “This is Iran.” Has this honor raised the profile of the women’s movement in your country?**

This prize will give more self-confidence to Iranian women, because they will understand that they have taken the right direction. I have always said that the glory of this prize is not mine alone, but that it belongs to the feminist movement in Iran. It belongs to all who are working for freedom.

**You mentioned that 65 percent of the students in college in Iran are women. Is this changing women’s consciousness?**

There is a proverb that says, “Modernity is born on the streets.” A woman who comes out of her house will become modern. She is different from a woman who stays at home and only cooks. The large number of educated women definitely leaves a mark on society. These educated women sometimes even revolt against their fathers. You saw one example in my book, when a girl who could not prove her point to her religious cleric father burned herself. That woman was so aware that she could not be happy with the life she had.

**You also mentioned in your book that you believe that incident was meant as a public protest to alert the wider public about women’s conditions.**

Yes, because our laws are prejudicial. In a society where women are more educated than men, the law says that the testimony of two women is equal to that of one man. The law says that the value of a woman’s life is worth half that of a man. The law says that one man can marry four wives. Her setting fire to herself was a protest against all these laws.

**In your challenges to the laws in Iran, you have appealed to the classic Islamic texts. Is that an effective strategy?**

The government of Iran claims that these prejudicial laws are derived from Islamic laws. I, by using the religious texts, want to prove that they are wrong. I want to prove that we can have better laws. I want to prevent abuse or misuse of religious law. I want to show people that the government has hidden itself behind the shield of religion.

**After the revolution that brought Khomeini to power, women like yourself were demoted from judgeships. Later on, they were returned because of shortages of personnel. What opportunities exist today for professional women in Iran?**

Women today work in all fields of life in Iran. They are university professors and they are the heads of universities, members of parliament, managers in companies. Even Mr. Ahmadianjad, who is the representative of fundamentalists, has one female deputy. Women today are judges, and we have a large number of women attorneys. So you see that Iranian women are everywhere.

**You mentioned that Iran as a country has a great sensitivity to injustice. Is this something that makes your work easier?**

Of course it is natural that when people in a country become sensitive, the work of the advocates of human rights becomes easier. That’s why I say that in Iran there are many advocates of human

rights. But the problem is that the government does not respect human rights as much as it should.

**As an academic institution that teaches human rights and encourages students to become involved in community projects, what steps do you think we could take that would help persecuted students and professors in Iranian universities?**

Broadcast our news. When someone has a problem in Iran or is arrested, bring this to the attention of everybody. Broadcast this on the news and let everybody know about it. When people around the world know about our situation, they will come to our aid.

America is a superpower, and as a superpower it has a responsibility for democracy around the world. But democracy cannot be dropped on people’s heads like bombs. The United States should join the International Criminal Court (ICC), and it should set an example for other countries to join. This is the way that dictators will soon be toppled. When a dictatorship comes to power, it has both money and arms, and people are powerless in front of it. That is why dictators stay in power and why people end up revolting and blood is shed. But if there is a court where people of these oppressed countries can go and complain against their governments, and that court can address these cases, then the dictators will not dare to mistreat their people. Very soon there will be democracy all over the world. This is the only way to spread democracy without aggression. Therefore, as a human rights advocate, I ask you to familiarize your students with the benefits of the United States joining the ICC. They should know that the day the United States joins the ICC, the history of the world will change.

**Why do you think the United States has been reluctant to join the ICC?**

Because the United States considers itself a superpower and does not want to see any power above itself. But being a superpower doesn’t mean that nobody can supervise what you do. The United States is afraid that by joining this court, its actions will be judged internationally.

Unfortunately, the policy of the United States versus international organizations is wrong. It seems that the United States wants to destroy the United Nations and wants to make decisions in its place. When there is talk about globalization, maybe the United States government thinks that the world is a small village and has only one chief, which is the United States. But I do not see globalization in this way. The world is a small village where all its inhabitants should have a say in running it.

The United States will not join the conventions that have been approved by the United Nations, and sometimes that is very surprising. For example, the case of the International Convention for Children’s Rights—all the countries in the world have joined it, except one, and that country is the United States. Isn’t it time for the people of the United States to ask their government why it is that their country has not joined the international conventions?