

Inconvenience is a Friend

by Abdi Nazemian

All my life, I've felt that my existence is inconvenient for a collective of other people. This meant that for so much of my life, I hid the parts of myself that made others uncomfortable. I was always an inconvenient Iranian who didn't exhibit behaviors that were acceptable to my cultural community. I preferred fashion to sports. I wasn't interested in going into business, medicine or law, like men of my culture were expected to. I longed for a creative life.

I understood long before I even knew what homosexuality is that I was different, but I hid those parts of myself. I became an expert not at lying, but at weaving an incomplete story of myself to make my community more comfortable. I never pretended to have girlfriends or to have other interests, but I also never shared information about what I was truly feeling.

Perhaps I would have been more open had I lived in a different time, come from a different culture. But in my childhood and my teen years, I felt that I might be the only gay Iranian in the whole world. Given the movies and books of the time, I thought only white people, western people, were gay. This was the 1980s and 1990s, long before the President of Iran said, in 2007, that "in Iran we don't have homosexuals like in your country." Of course, there are queer people in Iran, but what the President of Iran was really saying is that he doesn't want us to exist. Our existence is inconvenient to the story he wanted to tell about Iran, so he made us invisible.

Back when I was growing up, there wasn't even a word in the Persian language for being gay. All we had was a slur, which I heard too often, just as I heard slurs against gay people in French and in English in the hallways of every school I went to in France, Canada and the United States, the three countries my family found refuge in after the Iranian Revolution forced us to leave Iran.

I recognize now that the feeling I had as a kid – of my existence being inconvenient to a collective of people – is a feeling shared by most gay men of my generation. I came of age during the worst years of the HIV/AIDS crisis. As a teenager, I thought I had a choice between being myself and staying alive. My generation discovered our sexuality with fear and shame drilled into us. It took U.S. President Ronald Reagan 4 years from the start of the epidemic to even say the word AIDS. His message was the same as the President of Iran's: queer existence was inconvenient to the story he wanted to tell about America, so he kept us invisible.

When you're inconvenient, you have two choices: you can hide pieces of yourself to make others comfortable, or you can challenge people. I wish I could say I had been braver sooner, but the truth is I hid for a very long time.

When I went to college in New York City, I had fantasies that the gay community would embrace me, that I would finally fit in somewhere. But there was always a limit to how much I fit in. In all those years of being gay in mid-1990s New York City, I didn't meet a single other queer Iranian, or even another queer person from the Middle East.

It was very clear to me that there were stark differences between my gay experience, and the gay experience of my American friends.

Those differences made me a very inconvenient gay man.

Many of my American gay friends wanted to turn my family and the Iranian community into the antagonists of my life for not being more vocally supportive of me, and more progressive on gay issues. My friends spoke the language of American self-empowerment, which tells us that if someone doesn't accept us as we are, we should bid them goodbye. I spoke the language of immigrant families, which taught me that family loyalty comes before everything else. I was unwilling to walk away from my family and my culture to make the gay community more comfortable, and unwilling to live a false straight life to make the Iranian community and my family more comfortable.

What I'm describing as inconvenience is an experience that is all too common for many people who identify as belonging to multiple oppressed groups, especially queer people of color. We grow up caught between two worlds, two core parts of ourselves, that just don't make sense together. We are quietly taught at a young age to only reveal a piece of ourselves in the spaces we inhabit. We learn to live a divided life, to be a divided self. Thankfully, many brave people eventually challenge the systems that stop them from living a full life.

For me, that journey truly began when I came out to my parents in my mid-20s, almost a decade after I first came out to my high school English teacher. That's how long it took me to finally work through my own internal shame.

And yet... For years after my first coming out, I felt even more stuck. I thought coming out would bring my two worlds together, but it didn't. I found myself defending my family and the Iranian community when in the company of gay American friends. And then I found myself defending queer rights and gay culture when in the company of my family and Iranian community.

I felt invisible and defensive everywhere. I didn't feel seen. I longed to tell the stories that would help people understand my experience.

In my childhood, my refuge from feeling inconvenient was to immerse myself in stories, whether delivered through movies, books, comic books, music. The only places I ever felt I fit into were fictional ones. It felt like the real world had no space for me. I know firsthand the power of stories to heal the fractured parts of us because stories gave me the strength and hope to keep dreaming.

But while stories saved me, they also reminded me of my invisibility. Because I couldn't find myself in any of those stories. I searched for stories about a gay Iranian. There were none. Okay, fine any Iranian. There were some, but none told from a perspective that felt close to mine. Not being able to find myself in stories made me feel more invisible than ever. I decided I had to write myself into existence.

Easier said than done. I started my career as a screenwriter, but nobody in Hollywood seemed to want the scripts I wrote about Iranian characters, let alone queer Iranians. I thought perhaps writing novels was a better medium for my storytelling, and I wrote a novel called "The Walk-In Closet" about an Iranian gay man hiding his sexuality from his family. It was rejected by every publisher, and I gave up on that dream.

The disaster of my writer career in this moment gave me free time, which allowed me to make other dreams come true, the biggest one being becoming a father. I had the two most amazing kids, who are now twelve years old. I decided I would chase a new dream, a business degree, a more lucrative job to help me raise a family.

With what I learned in business school, I chose to self-publish my first novel, the same one every publisher rejected. It is the first published novel to feature an Iranian gay man as a lead character. It won the Lambda Literary Award for Best Debut. No publisher would publish it, so I did it myself. I turned my inconvenience into my friend, and it changed my life and gifted me a career as an author.

I also decided to stop waiting for companies to tell me what I could write. I wrote from my heart and wanted to support others doing the same. I got a job at a production company that supported independent filmmakers in making the kind of films studios are afraid of. Deeply queer films like "Call Me by Your Name".

In the process of truly celebrating everything that once made me inconvenient, I learned a new way of writing and existing, not grounded in fear and secrecy, but in honesty and curiosity. I wrote about all the things I hid for so long, with the help of a far more spiritual writing process I learned through the magical book "The Artist's Way" by Julia Cameron. Before reading that book, I viewed writing as a job, not as a responsibility. Even in my writing, I was hiding my fears and vulnerabilities. "The Artist's Way" taught me how to unite the fragmented sides of my identity on the page.

My greatest successes as a writer came not from writing what others wanted me to write, but from telling the most personal of my stories. My novel “Like a Love Story” is about three teenagers getting involved in AIDS activism in New York City in 1989 and 1990. One of them is a gay Iranian facing all the issues I’ve just spoken to you about. That book is about everything I was told to hide about myself. And ironically, it’s my most successful book, and the one that has made me feel the most understood.

My book “Only This Beautiful Moment” – the first but hopefully not the last to be published in Germany – is my most personal work. In telling the story of three generations of Iranian men in one family, two of whom are queer, one of whom is homophobic, all of whom are worthy of empathy, I hope to challenge those who would rather divide people to see the humanity in us all. As in all my books, it unites the queer and Iranian communities on the page, and attempts to make sense of the fractured relationship between east and west.

I don’t want to imply that I don’t still struggle with people who want me to be invisible. In the United States, where I live, my books are banned in numerous school districts. I feel heartbreak over the message it sends young queer kids who might be feeling the same feelings of shame I once felt. Queer stories for young adults are inconvenient to many people.

The point of this speech isn’t that challenges disappear when we finally come to a place of enlightenment. Challenges remain. HIV/AIDS is still a global crisis. Homophobia, transphobia, racism, sexism, antisemitism, Islamophobia and other forms of prejudice are too common.

But what I hope you’ll take away from these words is that sometimes, our challenges are also our gifts. In my life, living at an intersection meant never fully belonging anywhere. Too gay for the Iranian community. Too Iranian for the gay community. It’s been hard, and it’s been a gift. It forced me to reconcile seemingly irreconcilable things in my life and on the page. It gave me the hopeful defiance I needed to start a family, get married, fight for a truthful existence.

The inconveniences of life will always exist. Our job, as humans and as artists, is to turn every inconvenience into a friend. Like a true friend, the things that make us inconvenient will challenge us, teach us, make us feel less alone, and ultimately make us stronger.

All of which is why I hope that these words inspire you, in your own ways, to be inconvenient when you need to be. Treat your inconvenience as your friend, and make people see the things about you that make them uncomfortable. It won’t be easy, but it will be necessary. And it will feel good. Because if there’s one thing I’ve learned over two decades of writing, it’s that the act of creation only gratifies the soul when the stories we tell reflect our truth. The rest is a job, which is fine. But the work of making art should be more than a job. It should be a calling, a spiritual act, and in the words of James Baldwin, it should disturb the peace.