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Rites of Spring: Reflecting on Another Noroos

Noroos a time of self-reflection and renewal.

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The harsh winter of 2014 is officially over. The cold snowy days of the past few months have frayed nerves and humbled spirits. Spring cannot come too soon. The warmer light-filled days of spring bring hope and renewal. Spring rites are celebrated and acknowledged around the world. In Iran, the first day of Spring is also the first day of the New Year. Noroos is an ancient Zoroastrian holiday that Persians have celebrated with rituals that focus on the beginning and end of life, on rebirth, and on good and evil in the world. After the hectic short gray days of winter, Noroos offers a time of rest, renewal, and hope for new beginnings. The New Year's celebration offers a framework for self-reflection and re-connection to family and friends. During the first 13 days of the New Year, businesses close, affairs are organized,

houses are cleaned, friends and family are visited, and younger adults take time out to pay their respect to elders in order to give thanks for past sacrifices.

The celebration of the New Year offers both a public and private ritualized space for remembering the past, focusing on the present, and planning for the future. In recognition of the New Year Persian families prepare a special table to acknowledge life's challenges. The "haft-sin" table is arranged with at least seven symbolic items each of which begins with the letter "s," which in Farsi is called "sin." The items on the table are symbolic of life, health, wealth, abundance, love, patience, and purity. These include sabzee (wheat or lentil sprouts), which represents rebirth; samanu (a creamy pudding made from wheat germ), which symbolizes purity; seeb (an apple), which is associated with health and beauty; senjid (dried fruit), which is linked to love; sir (garlic), which is seen as medicinal and signifies health; somagh (the sumac berry), which is the color of the sun and suggests the victory of good over the temptation of evil; and serkeh (vinegar) or wine, which embodies old age and patience. Special meals are also prepared. These include rice with herbs "sabzi polo," fish, and ash, a soup dish made from spinach and herbs to which noodles are added in honor of the New Year. The noodle's round shape symbolizes the cycle and renewal of life.

On the last Wednesday of the old year (chahar shanbeh suri) bonfires are lit in public places. These fires reflect hopes for enlightenment and [happiness](#) in the coming year. As they shout and ask for health, happiness, and beauty, people of all ages leap over the flames. Persians believe this is night when their ancestors visit. It is also a night to exorcise evil spirits and attract good ones. Illuminated by the light of the bonfire, people, especially young boys, run through the streets and use spoons to bang pots and pans, which beat out the last unlucky days of the old year. As in Halloween in the U.S., these boys knock on doors and ask for treats. In order to make wishes come true families distribute special foods especially for older people and for those in need. Dried nuts, fruits, pistachios, roasted chickpeas; almonds, hazelnuts, figs, apricots, and raisins are mixed together and given away for good luck.

On the 13th day of the new year, Persians pay homage to the healing and renewing power of nature. Families and friends go outdoors to walk, hike, and picnic. Windows and doors are opened in order to clean out negative energy and to let in fresh air. The sabzee or greens grown from wheat or lentil seeds on the haft-sin table are gathered and thrown into a stream to symbolize the

passing of life and to expunge the bad luck that had emerged from past misdeeds. Following the 13th day of Noroos, life begins anew.

Traditional rituals like Noroos help to promote wellbeing and happiness. Everyone needs time and space for reflection and renewal. Change produces [anxiety](#) and [stress](#) at any age. As we get older it becomes even more difficult to re-evaluate and redefine life. We may feel that life has passed us by. We may feel that we do not have the wherewithal to start a new job, find a new home, or make a new friend. Even so, to maintain a satisfying life it is important to take stock of one's state and to make appropriate changes. There is no single prescription for living a satisfying life. What works at one point in life—a job, a house, a [diet](#), an exercise program—may need to be adapted to new transitions and changes.

Days of reflection like those offered during Noroos help us to appreciate the good in our lives. We think about the people who have helped us, the activities we enjoy, and the comforts that soothe us. They also propel us to reconsider what needs to be changed. Happiness and satisfaction are fluid. Priorities change, interests change, and new challenges evolve. Life's difficulties can help us grow and recognize the need for change. The great Persian poet Sadi wrote: "He knows not the value of a day of pleasure who has not seen adversity."

Happiness and fulfillment are possible at any stage of life. Social psychologists have explored happiness across the lifespan and found that external life circumstances account for only a small percentage of life's happiness. Being considerate and kind to others, counting our blessings, [forgiving](#) the self and others, and enjoying life's momentary pleasures, lead to long lasting satisfaction and happiness. In most surveys on wellbeing, 80 percent of the respondents say that they are generally happy. Even so, the dimensions of happiness are personal and subjective. With age we gain enough [wisdom](#) to realize that we are the best judge of what will make us a happy person. In his *In Search of Lost Time* Marcel Proust wrote that the only way we can discover wisdom is to travel through our own wilderness, a journey that no one else can take for us. We each come from different beginnings and no one can predict the paths our lives will take. It is through experience and evaluation that we can gain the wisdom to know how we should walk toward our future.

It is important to take time from our busy lives to reflect about the past, let go of prior concerns and frustrations, and plan for the future. Celebrations like

Noroos enable us to think, not only about ourselves but also about helping others. Noroos is not unique. Most religions include ceremonies for renewal. These rituals give us time and space for rebirth. As the famous eleventh-century Persian poet Omar Khayyam wrote: “be happy for this moment, this moment is your life.”