Emilie Wunderlich: Honorable Mention 2007
The Significance of Thought in Journey from the Land of No

“You must always think. If you do nothing else in life, remember what I’m telling you: Think!” (39). Her brother’s words are perhaps as much a prophecy as they are a command. The young Roya Hakakian does not foresee the events that are to transform her life and identity, but in the years that follow, she takes Javid’s words to heart. In the process, she discovers both the reward and the price of contemplation, of striving for insight. Certainly, as we take our own journeys through the world around us, we will learn as Roya does that honest thought is eye-opening and edifying, sometimes dangerous, but never to be regretted.

Roya could never have learned to value her thoughts, certainly never to write them down, had she not heeded her brother’s advice. Even when Javid is not beside her, she urges herself, “Think, Roya, think!” (41). Thinking prompts searching; searching brings discovery; discovery begs explanation. Roya, a self-proclaimed investigator, assembles piece after piece of evidence until at last she deciphers the code language of her parents, brothers, and neighbors. Her earliest discovery is the reason behind her brother Albert’s moving to America. Later, she observantly predicts the unhappiness that will plague Farah’s marriage to Jahan: “...[My discoveries] filled me with glee. The grown-ups could not tell fortunes,” she gloats, “but I could” (88). Years later, however, her discoveries no longer bring her amusement. Instead, one finding, perhaps better called an awakening, fills her with anger: “My lingering terror from all the hours at the headquarters, my final outburst at Nazila’s home, had pushed the clouds away from my awareness: there were no republics. And we were not free” (195). She continues, “All thoughts, all memories, gathered to forge a single feeling: Fury!” (195). During her youth in Iran, she chronicled her discoveries in writing – first in letters and later in notebooks. Finally, here in America, she has penned a memoir. Her writings reveal the extent to which she followed Javid’s command, “Think.”

Roya’s memoir tells us more about the rewards of probing and thinking. If Roya, at quite a young age, found purpose in discovery, what might we find? She unravels the mystery behind Farah’s secret love and decides, “I would only marry a man [who would be my] soul mate... who would truly believe in me.” What lessons can we learn from watching others? We can avoid heartache and open our eyes to truths that others refuse to see, just as Roya does in watching Farah. In fact, we recently had an opportunity to learn from another student, Ashleigh Husbands, at an English 100Y read-out. She bravely told us of her desperation to feel loved and the terrible heartache that resulted from her unwise relationship. Surely we ought to learn from her account as much as we are moved by it. In Roya’s case, she is impacted by the sad events that take place in her family and in her nation. Always probing, always thinking, she feels herself becoming “the family’s witness” (145).

Roya considers her newly found role in the family to be unique, but she is not the only one to discover that thought can sometimes be dangerous. Albert, Javid, and
Bez all journey to America early in the revolution when their outspoken political ideas threaten their safety in Iran. Though Roya emigrates from Iran years later with her parents, she too has felt, by that time, the hostility of the government toward independent thought. “A genius I’ve got on my hands!” her teacher rants. “Writing just what the Islamic Society is looking to find, day in and day out, to do away with your breed” (213). The context of Roya’s conversation with her teacher reveals that theirs is an affectionate relationship and that a desperate sense of urgency underlies the teacher’s harsh tone. Later, Roya’s father exhibits the same severe protectiveness as he burns her books and journals. Just by writing down her honest thoughts, she has placed herself in danger of facing the same fate Bibi faces: prison and cruel treatment.

Honest thoughts could also be termed beliefs; beliefs are to be held firmly, as Bibi holds hers. Fortunately, the worst treatment we usually receive from those who do not share our beliefs is laughter and ridicule. If we were to list the possible repercussions of holding to our beliefs, which of those repercussions could we circle as being enough to make us change those beliefs? Is ridicule enough to make us change our minds? My sister is only fourteen years old, but she defends and maintains her beliefs as firmly as an adult. Her classmates once laughed at her for refusing to help them pull a prank on the teacher because she believed that doing so would be wrong. I saw her cry when she came home that night, but the next day, I also heard her awed classmates testify of her firmness. Though the price of her resolve was far lower than the one Bibi pays in the memoir, my sister’s strength also challenged me to defend my sincerest beliefs when it might be easier to acquiesce.

Clearly, Hakakian uses Bibi’s imprisonment as an example of the cost of standing firm in the truth, not as an example of someone who took her beliefs too far. This is a useful example for us, as students and as contemplative individuals. Though it is true that American laws protect us from much of the violence that the Iranians faced for their outspokenness, we often cave under lesser pressures. What we must distinguish is this: which beliefs unavoidably affect our lives and destinies, and which do we consider less imperative? When Roya Hakakian came to UMBC to lecture on her memoir, she explained that for years, she fought her parents over their decision to leave Iran. She believed it had been wrong to leave her country in its time of upheaval. This belief was a part of her, so imperative that she was willing to battle her parents over the issue. In the memoir, however, Roya denigrates herself for cowardice at police headquarters, when she fails to acknowledge her beliefs and uses her Jewish background to advantage; but she writes with sad admiration of Bibi, who suffers for her courage. Through each of these accounts, Roya warns us that we must sometimes be willing to stand for our beliefs despite the consequences.

Journey from the Land of No is a chronicle, not only of Roya’s experiences in Iran, nor only of the events that take place in the Iranian revolution, but also of the workings of her mind as she deals with the mysteries and nightmares she daily encounters. Taught, even urged, to think at all times, she obeys. Her realizations
eventually lead her to rebel against the religious and social restrictions that are forced upon her. Javid’s advice to his nine-year-old sister, however, is challenging to us as well. Hakakian’s memoir ought to provoke us to examine our beliefs, evaluate them honestly, and then fight for the ones we most treasure. Perhaps our eyes will be opened; perhaps we will face opposition; but we need never be sorry for pursuing real understanding or for holding firmly to our beliefs.