

TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA

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The Hon. Soualee Cha and his grand generation

Our duties since theirs is done

We are like generations and generations of woodland animals, I suppose. Shy Asian sun bear, bashful babirusa, easygoing orangutan. A generous canopy of lush treetops has always sheltered us from our suriya sun, from monsoon raindrops as rhythmic and irresistible as Muhammad Ali's fists. Shadows deep as sleep have always kept us safe from hungry harimau, prowling for you and me, by name.

We are generations grown used to the cover of careful giants. Broad-shouldered, huge-hearted elders who've protected and schooled us with an understanding they earned in places and under pressures very different from the afternoon shade you and me have grown used to. Elders who whispered oaths about never exposing us to the despair they survived again and again.

Ugly colonialism and brutal local regimes, our caretakers outlived. They endured modern warring — those long-long moments of mass psychosis during which every imaginable technology is determinedly mass-manufactured then rushed across deep seas to splinter every last place an enemy's kids study, their parents work, their grandmas and grandpas make households.

When they leave, what?

"Hard times make strong hearts," our aunties used to tell and tell and tell us — toughening us up, down in milk-toast suburban Salem. "You can't really trust people who've never suffered," our uncles always said, looking sideways at TV news, at earnest American presidents, at smart congresswomen and confident congressmen.

And now these grand elders are leaving us. They are tired. This life has worn their bones thin. Their minds stray from you and me. God calls them, by name.

As each passes, then what? An inventory of our policy, business, and civil-society leaders, is not reassuring. Not at all. Not a rugged face in the room. No sincerity of the sort our elders might recognize. No muscularity of the kind that has always made our immigrant nation the real deal. Real to her ideals.

Great Grandpa Soualee Cha left us, the morning after Christmas Day. He departed during those most serene of moments between this mysterious world's night shift and our day shift. No longer thick night, but not yet another blessed day. Grandpa's big family was near.

Generation after generation of Grandpa's family had prepared for his departure, for days and nights — rubbing his village farmer's sturdy calves and sure feet; massaging his stubborn guerilla fighter's knotted shoulders and arms; tenderly kissing gratitude and whispering regrets onto his furrowed brow; smoothing the etched sorrows and joys of this grand man's beloved Lao highlands turned so suddenly into a furious kill zone; smoothing the strain of stewardship of his people's safety in Thai frontier refugee camps; erasing the evidence of his resettlement and reconciliation efforts in Hmong communities from sodden St. Johns to Fresno neighborhoods left behind

by the American economy.

How he did that

Grandpa Soualee Cha did so much. He did it so well. Let me tell you about three times I worked with him, with Portland Hmong elders and activists. Let me tell you what it meant and what it still means to us. To us Portlanders, Oregonians, and Americans.

Some years ago, there was a bad Hmong shaman who — like those bad Catholic priests who likewise believed they were also above punishment — was using his central California community's trust for personal gratification. He hurt a girl belonging to Grandpa's clan. She was too afraid to testify in criminal court, her family knew they would all suffer violent consequences in their lawless Fresno neighborhood. We left Portland, packed into a red Toyota 4Runner, right after local Hmong civic activists' day jobs. We drove all night.

We went straight to the prosecuting district attorney and told her we would secure the necessary trial witnesses, but only if she and her city's patrol officers personally guaranteed the victim's and her extended family's safety from that corrupt shaman's angry relatives and all those Asian gangsters eager to have their business. Predators.

No one had tried dealing that directly with Fresno law enforcement. No one expected any good from them. There's an awful history of local police getting their bust, of earnest prosecutors getting their conviction, then government abandoning those who made it all possible. Hit-and-run policing.

Moreover, the Honorable Soualee Cha promised the D.A. that he would refute the Hmong defendant's expert witness, a university professor ready to testify that this so-called "sacred sex" with teenagers was a culturally-acceptable shamanic practice. Grandpa's sure-footedness in all that uncertainty, put everyone, that frightened family and this inadequate system of justice, at ease. That abuser got 17 years in prison. He did not survive that sentence.

Grandpa was playing his central part in Portland police chief Tom Potter's style of community policing. Civic activists and cops policing their community, together. We did it a hundred times in Portland. Grandpa restored peace without government, when possible. He did his part in partnership with mainstream muscle, when we could come to accord on sharing burdens and benefits. He expected our best.

Why we respond

Grandpa Soualee Cha modelled how to expect tip-top drawer behavior from everyone. When this wasn't enough, as is often the case in the asymmetrical power relationships between our ethnic minority streams and our mainstream — we called in media. Like traditional Hmong elders gathering all those possibly impacted when making important moves, western democracy operates best under bright light. Sunlight or camera light, all the same.

TriMet opening its Westside MAX line



In the late '90s, four hundred feet under Washington Park, Grandpa Soualee Cha made peace with the disturbed spirits of this grand continent and with those of the deceased buried above the TriMet Westside MAX line. (AR Photo)

made it much simpler for our eastside immigrant moms to get to their very cool Silicon Forest jobs. No more two-hour carpooling of kids to schools and dads to their workplaces. It all would've been another brilliant example of western urban engineering, had that light rail not been so confidently laid under Sunset Hills cemetery. Or had they drilled that deep tunnel in consultation with another kind of civil engineering. Every major religious tradition reveres sacred ground. Sure we do.

Four hundred feet under Washington Park, Grandpa made peace with the disturbed spirits of this grand continent and with those of the deceased buried above. We did it at dawn, in the company of the City of Portland's ombudsman. Transportation officials stood near, transit police too. Producers for WNET New York, *Religion & Ethics* had cameras whirring, Oregon Public Radio was on. In the following weeks, clerics of other religious traditions followed. It all made the front page of *The Oregonian*; it was in *The New York Times Magazine*; we made national television. Participating in democracy, Grandpa taught us, requires a certain kind of toughness *and* tenderness.

Another example of Grandpa's kind of work that Portlanders still talk about, was an urgent Black/Asian neighborhood reconciliation, after a Hmong kid's very bad behavior. The Public Broadcasting Service's WNET, producers of the *Imagining America* series, filmed a segment titled *Hmong American Justice*. It was about our Hmong community taking responsibility for a cognitively disabled and recently laid-off young man's assault on his family's elderly African-American neighbors.

What we do now

Imagining America documented Hmong civic activists making right what their boy did wrong. The program clearly shows Portland's Police Bureau supporting community discipline, and all that in support of the kid's defense against deportation to the Lao People's Democratic Republic. The regime responsible for the ethnocide that sent our Hmong here. But the episode doesn't mention the intense negotiations between Portland's Hmong and our African-American church elders. The peace they made. The peace that

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makes neighborliness possible in those parts of town not served well by mainstream institutions.

What we do now, now that Grandpa's grand generation of big-hearted and broad-shouldered elders are leaving us, is make mainstream their muscular work, their humble work. We need to share better the daily burdens, the enormous social and the cultural benefits of our ethnic stream work.

Passively assessing our staid institutions' abilities to leave their racialized ruts is less, much less, than those careful and committed giants require from us. They protected, they schooled, you and me. Never mind for a moment our elder aunties admonishment about "hard times" and "strong hearts." It no longer matters whether or not Portland's or Oregon's or even America's leaders have earned that level of trust — Grandpa Soualee Cha's generation already paid, well in advance. Our elders paid up, so you and me must get down to business.

The business of building a better neighborhood, a bigger Us.

The Asian Reporter's Expanding American Lexicon

Babirusa (Bahasa Indonesia): Wild pig. Please see our local wild guys at the Oregon Zoo, <www.oregonzoo.org/discover/animals/north-sulawesi-babirusa>.

Harimau (Bahasa Indonesia): Great cat. Grand spirit. Tiger or panther.

Modern warring: Grandpa's story is told within the 1962-1975 U.S. foreign policy context. More explosive tonnage was dropped on the little Laos Kingdom inside those 13 years than the aggregate of all aerial bombardment in all preceding wars. Unprecedented destruction of both natural and built environments. U.S. military and CIA covert command made a sacred brothers-in-arms promise to ferociously loyal Hmong SGU (Special Guerilla Unit) fighters that together they would defeat Communist Viet and Laos armies. Hmong freedom fighters kept theirs, down to their last teenaged boys. When the U.S. did not, the Lao Hmong ethnocide was on.

Muhammad Ali (American Muslim): World heavyweight boxing and American civil-rights champion. The Greatest.

Orangutan (Bahasa Indonesia): Man of the forest. Long-red-haired arboreal ape.

WNET New York, Religion & Ethics: Portlander Tom D'Antoni's documentary is found online at <clip.hmongplus.com/ZnRkMHRfcDBhWmsz>.

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News page advertising deadlines for our next issue are:

January 20 to February 2 edition:

Space reservations due: Wednesday, January 15 at 1:00pm

Artwork due: Thursday, January 16 at 1:00pm

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Mark your calendar!

The Year of the Horse begins January 31, 2014.

Our special issue celebrating the Lunar New Year will be published on January 20, 2104.