

TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA

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The little pieces and the bigger peace

There are these lovely ladies in our office lunchroom. Daily each lingers a long-long moment over a slowly assembling table-sized jigsaw puzzle. A 1,000-piecer. It takes them a week or so, of a quiet minute each, to patiently put it all together. I envy their sharp focus. I'm awed by the complexity of the big picture their persistence produces.

These women own the tools necessary for our complex times. Times when the U.S. can no longer rely on mechanized bone-crushing power as a global problem-solving methodology. Not even our Canadian and British best buds consider it cool. Not anymore.

Domestically, America's inadequate and unkind social institutions can no longer afford to roll the way they do. The racialized ruts directing our schools and commerce, our mainstream's systems of justice and public administration, simply cannot contain our energetic immigrant and refugee streams. Not the numbers, not New American families' ambitions. No way.

The arithmetic is plain. The numbing financial and spiritual costs of our nation's endless warring abroad; the thick cost column of a continent gained by native nations' ethnocide, of an economy built on slave labor, of a union punctuated by episodic expulsions of entire ethnocultural communities — will be nothing. Nothing compared to the enormous ocean of bitterness we'll surely produce if the fundamental mindsets animating these soul-grinding systems are left in their ugly ruts.

Individual happiness or communal health

This brings us back to our office lunchroom — those quiet women, their eyes sweeping their task, their fingers elegantly paused mid-air. Each little puzzle piece matters. The big picture

depends on each considered carefully.

There are a thousand little puzzle pieces on that office lunchroom table. On our shared continent too. If you ask any of Portland's 1-in-5 foreign-born, a dozen pieces are badly handled, daily. And this goes without accounting for mistakes made with ethnic minority kids who, as their beloved teachers will tell you, now number about half of our city's classrooms. Given these demographics, sorting out our puzzle pieces right, will assure us a nation of joy. Bursting with creativity. A bigger and less self-centered America.

Here are three examples of small puzzle pieces, not carefully considered, not understood for the bigger picture each is a perfect part of.

Last week, my wife went to a new neighborhood yoga center. She was excited by the school's website with its opening lotus set inside a stylized mandala. The former is epistemologically central to Buddha dharma; the latter is a core construct of the Hindu religious tradition. Because both concepts are gifts from Mother India, because both my wife's and my family's homelands, Thailand and Indonesia, are neighborhood recipients of this grand matriarch's cultural legacy, we are happy every single time our new homeys adopt an ancient element already deep in our bones. Well, maybe not every time.

On this occasion, in this River City neighborhood, that yoga studio placed a buddha statue in front of the practice room, in front of the practitioners' pointed feet. The problem is, every properly parenting Thai — as well as every other Southeast Asian Portlander — teaches her kids to never point their feet at others, and never-ever at holy ones. Respect and reverence are at the tough and tender heart of our cultures. This is true back home; this is true right here.

Cambodian police break up protest for TV license

Continued from page 5

when police tried to break up another protest. Those protesters were demanding the release of 23 other demonstrators who were arrested during a recent crackdown.

The government imposed a ban on rallies and street marches in Phnom Penh after a wave of election protests in early January. The ban followed a violent clash in which at least four people taking part in a labor protest were shot dead by police.

The bid for a television license comes from Mam Sonando, a fierce government critic who is the owner and operator of Beehive Radio, one of the few opposition-aligned stations in Cambodia. He led the rally in front of the Information Ministry.

He also asked for a license for broadcasting a relay of his Phnom Penh-based radio station.

My wife gently pointed this out to her yoga teacher, who responded by expressing regret at offending my wife. Ogh. And herein lies our puzzle-piece problem. My wife was not struggling with a personal offence. Not at all. Nowhere on our precious little planet do an individual's feelings matter that much. This yoga teacher insisting that a personal apology is plenty, then pushing on, is like cramming a puzzle piece into place. A misplaced piece is not the right peace, and no amount of pushing power will make it fit.

What our shared future requires

Here are a couple more examples.

Last month I walked in on a well-meaning young man apologizing to a brother for entering a neighborhood mosque in shoes. Like the yoga instructor, this Portlander was framing the issue in terms of a New Worlde inadvertently offending an Old Worlde's *personal* sensibilities. And again, it was off point.

Those traditional cultures with three or more millennia of resilience under their belts, don't worry so much about each instance of hurt feelings. Not so many issues are taken personally. Imagine those ladies personalizing their task of putting their puzzle together. Impossible. We'd never see the big picture for all the time and attention squandered on individuals making mistakes.

A final example. Last year, a visitor in our mom's home realized that only he was rubbing her grandson's bushy head. Affectionately mussing his hair the way mainstreamers do. More embarrassment ensued for both our guest and our boy, when the guy grabbed even more emotional space by addressing his error as if it were personal offense for our kid.

It's not. The boy's a knucklehead. It's not about him. It's about your head and mine, it's about all our minds, and each small place each takes in the big puzzle of this blessed continent, a shared space we'll all have to share a bit better.

And sharing better will require our dominant culture to take three steps back from what George Harrison generously called the "I Me Mine" paradigm. Translation: Your little puzzle piece, my little peace, mean not so much in the grander Bhagavad Gita (Song of God) — as Mother India would put it.

Which cycles us right back to where our column began — standing next to those metaphorical ladies, each hovering a long moment or two, over their careful construction project. Their 1,000-piece puzzle.

Guantánomo Bay in Asian-American history

Continued from page 6

protections. What Guantánomo Bay tells us is that human rights are not universal, implicitly affirming the humanity of U.S. citizens against the "inhumanity" of those who are not.

Guantánomo Bay is no longer news. The revelation that some of the prisoners were tortured did not accelerate its closure. The presence of Guantánomo has become a normalized cost of U.S. citizenship, an overhead built into preserving "our" collective freedoms so "we" can continue as a democracy founded on law and justice. But as history has already shown, who "we" are is subject to change. If we abandon our commitment to due process and civil liberties, especially during times of heightened conflict, then we abandon ourselves to a future in which we too might be perceived as a threat.

There are a thousand little puzzle pieces on that office lunchroom table. On our shared continent too ... Sorting out our puzzle pieces right, will assure us a nation of joy. Bursting with creativity. A bigger and less self-centered America.

Actually, each of them are much like a ports commissioner, mindful of the "port" part of Portland. Each understanding how each puzzle piece is essential to the big picture, but only if gently set in its proper place. A small space. Not a lot of room for a big ego.

The Asian Reporter's Expanding American Lexicon

Buddha dharma (Pali, Hindi): Teachings of Lord Buddha.

Epistemology: The philosophy of how we know what we think we know.

George Harrison (1943-2001): British musician and humanitarian. Composer, vocalist, and lead guitarist for The Beatles. Along with Pandit Ravi Shankar, Mr. Harrison is credited with introducing classical Indian music and Hindu spiritual constructs to 1960s and '70s western popular culture. His 1970 release "I Me Mine," contrasts western self-centeredness with eastern self-minimization. Vedic traditions posit that ending personal and world suffering begins with reducing ego.

Heads and feet: Many Old World cultures consider all things, from micro to macro, as ordered in nature's way. Naturally, our heads are high and our brains do higher functions. Naturally, our feet are low and smell bad. Heads should be given high respect, shoes and all the lowly stuff of street life should be left outside of the sacred space a wife makes of her home. Her family protects the high place where she nurtures us.

Lotus: A water-born plant, set out as a metaphor for each human soul doing his or her very best, growing out of the dark nutrient soil at a pond's bottom, and with a little looking and trying, grows toward the enlightenment of the sun. Once on the water's surface, a lotus blossom opens, beautifully.

Mandala (Vedic, Hindi): A kind of spiritual blueprint of our universe.

Endangered turtles face new threat in Indonesia

Continued from page 2

returning to the beach where they were born every year.

"It's alarming in a place like Derawan," he said. "Protecting the species alone is not enough. There has to be consideration about the capacity of the food itself, the seagrass."

Seagrass is part of an important ecosystem, providing food, shelter, and nurseries for different types of fish, mammals, and invertebrates. It helps maintain the health of coral reefs, mangroves, and marshes, while also preventing erosion and keeping water clear by trapping sediment coming from land.

A 2011 global survey found that 14 percent of all seagrass species are at risk of going extinct, largely due to pollution, coastal development, deforestation, sedimentation, sewage runoff, and dredging.

Green turtles are classified as endangered on the International Union for Conservation of Nature's Red List of Threatened Species.



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