

TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA

■ Polo



My awesome afternoon on The Hill

I was invited to speak on The Hill. To OHSU.

"I'm headed up The Hill," I breathlessly called our mom across our deep blue sea. I told familia and friends as speedily as I could dial.

"Yup, I'm speaking up on The Hill," I told two nice nodding Korean ladies on the T.J.Maxx up-escalator. I told a grumpy Anglito, next urinal over at Irvington Applebee's. The ladies smiled, the guapo grunted. So proud I was.

Ja tentu, I was telling the world because, you know, not everyone gets invited up there, up to OHSU. That's Oregon Health & Science UNI-VERS-sit-tee — for all our FOB ricepicker cousins. For those not yet in the know.

OHSU is packed with nationally envied teachers, with internationally linked researchers and really smart docs, with nurses as practical as any immigrant mom, as patient as Lord Buddha. Adduh'illaah (OMG) the president of our IRCO board of directors — Dr. Valerie Palmer — works up there. Up on that hill.

That staid institution, was asking me to speak. I kid you not.

Pero un momentito. Before you and me and my asthmatic Taiwanese motorbike go up there, allow me a small explanatory digression, to account for my unwashed generation's propensity to shamelessly overstate the size of any welcome mat into America's mainstream.

What anxious New Americans do

I am a child of a folk living between giant warring nations, each believing they owned our soil, our oil, our women. Our parents raised us during the dark years that follow every nascent nation's first few decades, during the dirty years of terrible, tightly contained bitterness breaking out, devouring simple villages, pretty towns, and tall cities, like a disease. We fled.

Our parents picked up, raising us again in the Netherlands. Then again in Salem, Oregon. They made the most of everything they worked and worked for, for us. For we had no next place to go.

We settled into chaotic 1960s America. The U.S. was warring in Viet Nam. When the Selective Service drew my draft number, I dashed for the door. I did not graduate from high school. Our pop would not send any of his boys back into all that rage.

In short, for readers who've never lived like a bird on a wire — a sparrow never sure how soon a bigger and badder bird will chase you away, again — let me tell you how much it means to tell an easily startled mom that my miserable motorbike and me are heading up The Hill.

It is huge. Acceptance is the highest high of all.

Having said aaall that, ma'af ma'af, let me start my real story, the one about my hour at the top of curvy and leafy Sam Jackson Park Road. At OHSU. I was asked to address Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. It's that time of year we set aside to examine how we're doing here.

So, as I was settling into a voice most likely to reach our audience's ethnic, generational, and occupational mix, it suddenly struck me how predictable (boring) I would be for the next hour if I stuck to text.

What American Asians need now do

High school history hardbacks have already laid out how long Asians and Pacific Island pioneers have lived and loved here — falling Doug firs, growing apples, running grocery and dry-goods stores. We've already read how, with the regularity of capitalism's manic mood swings, America has expelled our Hawaiian, Filipino, Punjabi, Chinese, and Japanese families. A hundred and fifty years of that. Who doesn't already understand that it's the same mean business for our hardworking Latinos.

Unhappy history needs no recitation. Moreover, that well-educated and well-dressed audience was trusting me with a full hour of their well-compensated time. They needed to get something they didn't already own. Critique was out. Their moms would not appreciate me biting the hand that feeds us, rather well. America's mainstream may just yank away the welcome mat. As our history would have it.

So instead of taking out that stale oppressed-minority narrative (as if, in addition to 150 years of uncertainty here, we're no wiser for 300 years of European nastiness back there), I thought it best to stay in our room. To stay with who we are. With here and now.

And there we were — inside that fine auditorium, on top of that prestigious hill — moving rather determinedly into America's fast lane. Lexus, Nordstrom, Stanford, and certainly some OHSU building directories, are all doing well by us. Because of us. Our moms and grand-mas should be proud. Kasihan'illaah.

Our problem is, while we're doing well for Oregon's mainstream, we're not doing so much for our own Asian and Islander ethnic streams. The problem is the giddiness I couldn't contain, call after phone call, while riding T.J.'s escalator, while standing in Applebee's boys' room.

Our parental generation's intense need for settled Americans' approval, and of course for other New Americans' envy, has

driven us farther and farther from our communities' elders and ancestors. It has distanced us from the cultural and spiritual capital that has always sustained us — laughing like babies, crying like children, loving like confident adults — no matter how angry those colonial bosses, or how ugly those American mobs.

Our parents' generation's anxious commitment to tightly disciplining, tidily dressing, and intensely educating their kids, must be understood for what it is — an adaptive strategy for a hostile environment. A successful one to be sure, but nonetheless a *situational* strategy based on most newly arrived families' socio-economic marginality. On our relative powerlessness. Our fear.

Our younger brothers, for example, speak only English because our pediatrician said, with our mom earnestly nodding — that speaking two languages only confuses and slows little guys. Our abbreviated or absent American manners, though they raised our pop's blood pressure through our suburban rancher's roof, were code for our inclusion into Salem culture.

Asian as an asset, not a racial minority

Every good immigrant parent makes these practical calculations, though in the aggregate they amount to erasing our elegant and muscular past. The erosion is permanent. The eventuality is "Asian" or "Pacific Islander" as a check box, on census surveys, school forms, job applications, driver licenses, voter registrations. As if Asian were a race. As if we weren't hundreds and hundreds of distinct histories and dignified cultures.

All these considerations suddenly paralyzed me, for one very long pause in front of all those very smart Asians. Those of us in that room, on top of our professions, *have* done well in Oregon's mainstream, but not so well for our communities of nurture. The data confirms the former. The data doesn't touch the latter.

Now, about medical professionals I don't know a lot, but if an analogy to Oregon's lawyers is valid, I can say with some certainty that Asians are making it into government practice and into downtown corporate practice, but we are failing to deliver law in our own neighborhoods. I'll bet the same is true for the delivery of medicine.

Now's a good time to evolve us into a new level of play. For Oregon's pioneering Asians and for our post-1975 arrivals, it may be time to relax our focus on getting ahead. If we don't turn around, we're at risk of losing our precious past. If we don't reaffirm our enormous social and spiritual capital, we will lose what mainstream America actually longs for. Our sacrifices will amount to a racialized check box. And minorities, history texts say, are always losers when the majority rules.

Lucky for our more-settled Asians that newly arriving Asians, also children and grandchildren of Mother India's or Mother China's deep cultural wellsprings, daily unpack their bags here. They come as exhausted and bewildered as we did, and they're as rich with cultural integrity as we were. Let's trade.

Newcomers can and they will reinvigorate our shared social and cultural bank accounts, if in return we protect

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moms as anxious as ours from their acceptance anxieties. Everyone will benefit from Old Worlders not giving up quite so much to become American.

We begin this turnaround by doing as well for Oregon's ethnic streams as we're doing for our mainstream, and we start this trip by getting as giddy about getting out to east Portland as I did about my appearance up on that hill.

Me and my asthmatic Taiwanese motorbike came down from OHSU easier, much easier than our ride up. Of course it was because we coasted easily between those tall Doug firs and ancient maple; of course it was on account of our elders' awful sacrifices getting us up there.

But really we breathed easier because we're turning a corner on what we can contribute to America. Our America. And I don't mean making bigger earnings quarters for Acura or Banana Republic.

Nota: In truth, I did not get to OHSU on an esteemed academic's invitation. My boost came from an ethnic streamer, another Asian Reporter and APANO contributor, a proud mom of a lovely St. Mary's Academy high schooler. In short: I got there by her coming down here. The point, the trade, of this story. Salamat po, Maileen binti.

The Asian Reporter's Expanding American Lexicon

APANO: Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon. Statewide advocacy organization founded by local Viet Kieu elder Thach Nguyen.

Binti (Passar Bahasa): Baby sister.

Draft number: When I was a teen, America sent kids to war by lottery. Government guys drew my draft number.

FOB: Fresh Off da Boat. Often, we settled Asians make fun of newly arrived one's dress and behavior because we see in them what we've lost — simplicity and sincerity.

IRCO: Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization. Our nationally envied newcomer integration agency.

Ja tentu (Passar Bahasa): Yes, certainly.

Kasihan'illaah (Passar Bahasa): Oh God loves you.

Ma'af ma'af (Bahasa Indonesia): Sorry, so sorry.

Momentito (Spanish and Passar Bahasa): A tiny moment. An excellent code-switch word.

Pero (Spanish and Tagalog): But. Except that —. Another code transition.

Salamat po (Tagalog): Thank you. May yours be peace.

Pope leaves South Korea after urging peace

by suspicion, confrontation, and competition, and instead to shape a culture formed by the teaching of the gospel and the noblest traditional values of the Korean people."

When he was a young Jesuit, the Argentine-born Francis had wanted to be a missionary in Asia but was kept home because of poor health. He used his trip to South Korea to rally young Asians in particular to take up the missionary call to spread the faith.

He also used the trip to console Koreans: He met on several occasions with relatives of victims of the *Sewol* ferry sinking, in which 300 people were killed in April. Throughout his trip, he wore a yellow pin on his cassock that was given to him by the families.

Pope Francis received the butterfly pin from Kim Bok-dong, one of the "comfort women" who attended his mass. These elderly South Koreans, many of whom regularly appear at rallies and other high-profile events, are looking for greater global attention as they push Japan for a new apology and compensation.

In an interview with The Associated Press before the mass, another one of the women, Lee Yong-soo, who often speaks to the media, said she hoped the meeting would provide some solace for the pain she and others still feel more than seven decades after they were violated.

AP writer Foster Klug and video editor Kiko Rosario contributed to this story from Seoul.

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Yeom Soo-jung dedicated a "crown of thorns" to the pope made from barbed wire taken from the heavily fortified demilitarized zone separating the two Koreas. "Ut unum sint" reads the inscription "That they may be one" — a phrase usually invoked when praying for unity among Catholics, Orthodox, and other Christians, but given an entirely new meaning in the Korean context.

In his homily, Francis said the Korean people knew well the pain of division and conflict and urged them to reflect on how they individually and as a people could work to reconcile.

He challenged them to "firmly reject a mindset shaped