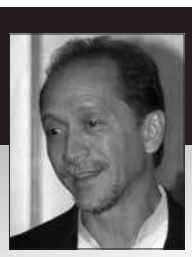
TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA



■ *Polo*

Ferguson, an American dreamer's road there

I am a New American. Like all immigrant families, ours adapted quickly to the core American ethos about working hard and earning success. Adjusting ourselves around that other core American cultural construct, Race — code for the awfulness simmering just beneath settled white and black America — was a lot harder.

To put it plain: Until the morning our two uneasy host communities settle the bitter lock of America's excruciating family fight, it will be simply impossible for us to live in peace here. We'll never be free to pour our shameless optimism into our new neighborhoods. Race so distorts this robust nation.

Our city's 70 or so ambitious immigrant communities are dazed every next time this shallowly sequestered issue erupts into episodes abbreviated into "Watts," or into "Rodney King," or now into "Ferguson." Code for so much pain. So much uniquely American sorrow.

So what follows is an earnest newcomer's best try at sorting it out. *Jatentu* (of course) it is an outsider's observations, even since Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville, we have added up to 200 years of off-key observations. But that's what happens when you're handed code instead of shared sheet music.

So let me try, just try a perspective that's a bit less bitter and much less likely to so paralyze our otherwise inspiring nation.

Our family is from a 3,000-mile archipelago of episodically angry volcanoes and hungry seas. Geographers call it the Pacific "Ring of Fire." For us, code for 4,000 years of anxious adaptation to unstable tectonic plates. Not so long ago, the nascent Indonesian nation shoved our ethnic minority community out to sea. It was an era of excesses characteristic of every new state that has contained communal humiliation and rage until that fateful afternoon those guys governing suddenly lose their grip on it, and on us. The United States generously gave our family refuge. *Terima kasih banjak*, we offer our love, in gratitude to you.

2014 and the Ferguson Code

2014 ended with America settled into tense white and black geographies. Morning and evening news report a country as edgy as our old world.

Back there, on our Indonesian archipelago, families duck and pray every next time our earth heaves up a killer quake. Everyone stops cold, waiting and weeping over which baby boy, which elegant grandma, will our suddenly hungry ocean sweep away. Back there, a lot like right here, we believe we can do nothing about our world's perpetual simmering or her occasional tantrumming. So, with each next "Krakatoa" (code for killer volcano) like with each next "Ferguson," we duck, we pray, until it passes. Then we go back to business as usual.

During America's chaotic 1960s, our family walked single file off an iron steamer into Hoboken. We quickly boarded a slow train for Salem, Oregon. The next three decades of CBS news taught us about "Watts," about "Rodney King (code for Watts II)," and about "OJ" (the dizzying opposite of Watts).

We learned there are in fact, two codes. One for each side of each next catastrophic episode. To our white neighbors, "Watts" meant fear. For African America "Watts" was despair. For Side A, "OJ" means stunned disbelief; for Side B, it was barbershop cheers.

In our neighborhoods, we observed two totally different societal and spiritual daily lives in the buildup, in the blowup, then in the cleanup of each next explosive episode. And how each side coded that.

I've really tried to stay clear of it. I really have. Because love of family, because love of the land nurturing us, because our Creator's Love, are so cultural core for us. Because love's the opposite of bitterness.

But because our brown New American numbers have made our invisibility less likely, I've been obliged to get into the thick of it. Our crew of community elders and civic activists has lawyered the sometimes instructive and destructive intersections between ethnic-stream and mainstream America, since the Reagan 1980s. We work our state's system of blind laws and excessive order — a regime numbing both its administrators and its recipients. A world of grinding tectonics and intermittent upheavals.

Here's how our numbing happens: I'm waiting patiently to pick up pretrial discovery at the Washington County D.A.'s office. Attorneys ahead and behind me are getting served. The harried counter lady finally makes eye contact, but she sees me as her printer repairman. "The Xerox's back here," she says, leading me there.

"Umm, I'm defense counsel," I say when we arrive.

"Oh," she says.

I leave saying nothing. I know I should hold her eyes a long moment and let her see how much this hurts our ancestors and our elders. How she harms our proud, our selfless and so wounded Pop.

Here's how dehumanizing happens: In courtrooms of jurisdictions not used to lawyers like me, judicial assistants mistake me for their next case interpreter.

"I'm defense counsel," I say.

"Oh," they say.

Then — instead of directly addressing these guys' humanity, by explaining how their seeing me wrong so disrespects people I love, to say nothing of the $80,000 I still owe for law school — I let out a long hot breath, like our grinding tectonic plates underfoot do back home. And I avoid further eye contact.

I abbreviate it all with "This is what happens when you arrive dressed well, same as Xerox techs or court interpreters do." It's a code. It gets me the heck out of there, before I do a "Krakatoa." The fallout of which, will surely land on defendants going home to families not as educated or empowered as mine. *Jatentu* (for sure).

That handy abbreviation worked well until one April morning, when one of those suddenly explosive American moments erupted under me. It was only a matter of time.

It's Sunday morning, and I'm sitting curbside, driver-side window open, listening to NPR's "Car Talk" guys.

"HOLD IT RIGHT THERE," someone barks. "I WANT TO SEE BOTH YOUR HANDS. *NOW*."

I turn my eyes, just my eyes, way left. A young cop is crouched low, gun drawn. Her face is contorted; her entire being is

Dr. Benjamin Spock (left) and Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (right) march in a parade on State Street in Chicago on March 25, 1967. (AP Photo)

dangerously escalated. Her weapon hums three meters from my head. She sees deadly danger in me. And she's acting on it.

To be clear — because moments like these require some clarity — I was only guessing at what she was seeing. I didn't know. I *did know*, though, what my son's best friend's (white) mom was thinking of me, as she and our boys pulled up to that same curb, as I'm handcuffed facedown on wet asphalt. I also *knew* what our elderly neighbors, peering out their apartment windows, were likewise believing about me. About my boy. About our elders and ancestors — all of us the color of our beloved homeland's verdant soil.

Today, what that angry officer saw in me, I still don't know. In the weeks following, no one would say. Not her, not her sergeant, not his precinct commander, not our police bureau's downtown execs. After a year of asking, I gave up asking. I concluded that the Code was enough.

Between black and white codes

Until Ferguson, until 2014, I believed I was beyond needing to hear honest accountings from downtown judicial officers, from their neighborhood law enforcers, and from the residents they're sworn to protect. But now, I can't let it go.

Brown America's rapidly expanding zip code, the one between white and black geographies, cannot have this core American construct so paralyze us too. Contributing to it will be the ruin of our shared nation.

Since Ferguson, while riding morning TriMets and while waiting at Starbucks, I've been snooping on Portlanders talking about Ferguson — that is, about the sudden tragic deaths of two unarmed black men and a black boy. I am learning more by listening than by asking questions.

From folks racially identifying with those officers using lethal force in Ferguson, in New York, and in Cleveland, I'm hearing a deep longing to be right. To be affirmed, as good people. A most human need. Unhappily, if we stick to America's Race code, those on Side A need societal confirmation that Side B therefore be wrong. Our species' neocortical wiring requires this symmetry. So does the Code.

Regrettably, Ferguson and New York grand juries returned these reassurances. They've reported that those white policemen correctly assessed, then properly acted on, these black men. Side A acted within the law and by implication Side B did not. The Code is affirmed.

Now, though many downtown bus-ride and coffee-line versions of these two grand juries' findings that I've snooped into, are wildly inaccurate, what matters most for my unscientific rendering is that folks are moving into a soothing societal summary that this particular black teen and this particular black dad were doing something wrong enough to result in their deaths. Indeed, we're settling into a national conclusion that this episode of African-American suffering need not move white America. The Code is holding.

On bus lines and in checkouts some distance from our city's vigorous mainstream, you cannot duck mothers' sorrowing. You cannot avoid fathers' fears for their boys. I am overcome by teenagers' turmoil. Their pain is ancestral and familial and deeply personal. Their outrage is fresh. This communal bitterness — is Ferguson.

"And there can be no great disappointment," the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. told us soon after our familia arrived here, "where there is not great love."

The Code is working. It's handling mainstream anxiety, it's burying African-America's betrayal. While America's news cycle moves on, the Code is killing us.

Finishing this family fight

For those of us not yet conditioned into either version of the Code, it's hard to live with how well this abbreviation is managing our mainstream's anxiety that something awful is happening. And that this awfulness is enforced workday-in and workday-out in neighborhoods across town. Indeed, that this numbing regime is benefitting those they love.

And, exactly like our Indonesian families living on our precious little planet's edgiest real estate, it's easy to understand middle-class America's belief that nothing can be done about this status quo.

As a dreamy newcomer, let me suggest that our more settled neighbors are surrendering way too much national love and treasury on this core cultural institution. The Code is paralyzing our compassion and it's killing our creativity, the two attributes that have always earned America great respect, everywhere. What's more, I suspect that folks on busses and in Starbucks already know how to fix Ferguson.

We know how to fix it — because "it" is us. Everyone knows what a family fight is. Family fighters are intimately tied by old regrets and new revenge. We are combatants over the betrayal of love; our episodic eruptions keep our fight fresh. "And there can be no great disappointment," the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said soon after our familia arrived here, "where there is not great love."

No other social order, as much as family, understands so intrinsically how to return us to the tender origins of our affection. Family knows how to return us to our hearts and bones, before each was broken. And if, rather than seeking self-affirming narratives from government or media, we might simply let ourselves feel these black mothers' unbearable pain. And weep with them. If we would just once *not* numb our hearts against those inconsolable kids who lost their only dad. If we would instead, share ourselves for that entire long moment, you and me will surely recognize our shared sorrow. And our shared humanity.

In that pause, instead of separate codes choking us, common cause could open us. In a moment free of guilt or rage, compassion could kick in. Then creativity, that American attribute most awed by our wobbly little world, would allow us to do what we do best — remake ourselves. Compassion and creativity. Trust in this, then trust in that.

To manager Antonio of Mall 205's Denny's diner, and to the honorable Ong Van and energetic Son Van of Pho Van restaurant, three generous faces and two generations of entrepreneurial Portlanders — 1,000 thank yous for your cinnamon pancakes and endless hot coffees, for your fragrant noodle soups and crazy caphesuanong (rocket-fuel Viet coffee), while I worked through this long difficult essay. Your staffs and their families make America proud.

-- Polo