

TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA

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Families move

Forget legal abstractions and awful bigots

Daily, our evening news startles then totally paralyzes me. Donald Trump says Mexican “rapists” are lurking in our neighborhoods; the Public Broadcasting Service reports the moody Mediterranean is swallowing another hundred Arab and African “displaced migrants”; the British Broadcasting Corporation runs footage of my own homeland, Indonesia, shoving a packed boatload of Rohingya “asylum seekers” back out to sea. Out into our hungry Andaman Sea. Skinny moms and babies and grandpas. In his very best English, a single schoolboy shouts out, “Please-please, sirs. We are thirsty.”

That boy’s words play and replay inside me. So full of meaning they are. The words *asylum seeker* and *displaced migrant* and *rapist* rattle around inside too — words which are in fact, fundamentally contrary to what my eyes just saw, and what my heart already knows. They’re wonky words and ugly words that short circuit my human reflex to jump in after a family drowning, after a kid thirsting.

Legal abstractions and polarizing clichés daily distort conversation about the brutality of where new Americans have always come from. Wordy distractions are

drowning out that poor kid’s truer words. *Please-please, sirs.*

Words can distance you and me. Words can lock us into institutional cruelty. Say: *Immigration*. Say it at work or at a dinner party, say it in a Starbucks morning coffee line. It’s a conversation killer. We dash to adversarial policy positions, punctuated with awful stereotypes. And our humanity — the real fears of folks anxious about America taking on another vexing global urgency, and the real sorrow of those abandoned by the kind and creative nation we’ve always looked up to — is shoved out to sea.

A simpler, kinder narrative

I’ve been looking around for another narrative, one less likely to mute my impulse to yank that skinny boy from his miserable boat. I’ve been thinking of simply saying “families move,” because we do. Because human communities have migrated determinedly all over our achy earth’s lovely face since memory began. Here on River Columbia’s generous shore, we’ve done about 140 centuries of this. That’s a lot of families moving.

We migrate like Pacific gray whale families and Columbia River’s sockeye salmon do. Every autumn hundreds of



Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO) board director Tatiana Youseff welcomes attendees at an IRCO event.

hushed Portlanders on spread picnic blankets awe the chimney migration of Chapman Elementary’s Vaux Swifts. Thousands and thousands spew out of that school’s tall stack, nervously chattering in a mix of English and Spanish before jetting down to sunnier Mexico. Bigger bugs too.

We can try to stop folks from moving. Governments do. Tall walls get erected. Borders get electrified. But just like when we dam living rivers, natural and necessary consequences follow. When Chinook salmon suffer, so do native and newer nations, so do cities and industries, so do ranchers, farmers, and fishers. You can try walling out Mother Mexico’s ambitious children or walling in proud Palestinians. But crushing parental optimism produces ferocious commerce in frightened families, in vulnerable kids and women, in drugs and guns, and the two most violent businesses of all: war and poverty.

Seeing movements of irrepressible

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parents, their energetic kids and elegant elders, as natural and necessary, is the same as acknowledging how we’re all participants in our shared green planet’s pattern of moving her grazers and hunters and shoppers from place to place to place. From there, we can orchestrate our international relations and our domestic policies to the truth of it. Families move.

One hundred twenty centuries ahead of Lewis and Clark paddling in, families migrated around generous River Columbia’s shores. For our last two centuries, those families moved to Indian reservations, then again from terminated tribal lands to our cities; families moved from Jim Crow’s south to north Portland’s shipyards; since the fall of Saigon, the fall of Berlin’s wall, and City Hall’s failed promises to Albina, African-American families, Asian, African, Arab, Spanish- and Russian-speaking families, Caribbean and Pacific island families — have all moved to River City’s stubbornly optimistic far-far eastside. And that’s the truth.

We have always, we will always, move. The only unknown in this narrative is our national and state policymakers’ readiness to work with us.

By Megan Petersen
Ketchikan Daily News

KETCHIKAN, Alaska (AP) — Yoga philosopher Ram Vakkalanka is blunt when talking about common perceptions about yoga, the ancient Indian practice of meditation and physical movement.

“Many people when they hear the word ‘yoga,’ they think that it’s about making sure that they look good in tight, stretchy pants, which it is, but yoga goes deeper than that,” he said.

Vakkalanka said he hopes he presented Ketchikan residents with “a comprehensive look at yogic discipline, yoga as a lifestyle, yoga as a mantra of philosophy to live by” with a series of workshops and performances organized through Ketchikan’s Advaita Yoga Center, according to the *Ketchikan Daily News*.

The weekend retreat included a catered concert featuring Vakkalanka on the *sitar* — a traditional Indian stringed instrument — accompanied by local musicians Chazz Gist and Dave Rubin. Elizabeth Johannsen and Raffy Tavidagian of the New York Café provided a traditional Southern Indian meal for the event.

Vakkalanka and Advaita Yoga Center owner Carol Naranjo also hosted a series of workshops and meditative yoga classes throughout the weekend.

“The workshops are essentially about energy work,” Vakkalanka said. “Most of the time, we tend to identify ourselves with our physical body ... but actually we are a confluence of various wonderful energies inside of us. Those energies are trying to express themselves through the medium of the physical body. The workshops are focusing about those energies — which are known as ‘the Chakras’ in the Sanskrit language — and how to balance those energies, because when the energies are balanced, we experience a state of wellbeing at many, many levels — physically, mentally, emotionally, spiritually. We feel healthy only when the energies are balanced.”

Workshops addressed the origin and evolution of yoga, Sanskrit language, mantra chanting, the chakras, and the Bhagavad Gita.

“Bhagavad Gita helps us to understand our life’s purpose — Why am I here? Why am I born in this time, in these circumstances, among these people? What’s the purpose of my life? What’s the reason of my existence?” Vakkalanka said.

“The idea is once we’ve discovered that, then we have a true purpose in our life, and unless we know the true

Yoga philosopher brings lessons to Ketchikan



ANCIENT INDIAN PRACTICE. Yoga philosopher Ram Vakkalanka plays a harmonium in Ketchikan, Alaska. Vakkalanka said he hoped he presented Ketchikan residents with “a comprehensive look at yogic discipline, yoga as a lifestyle, yoga as a mantra of philosophy to live by” with a series of workshops and performances organized through Ketchikan’s Advaita Yoga Center. (Taylor Balkom/Ketchikan Daily News via AP)

and learning yogic philosophy.

Naranjo picked up yoga after her daughter gave her a yoga video to help with back pain, but she said she really committed to her practice when she saw an ad in a yoga magazine for an Indian yoga retreat.

“I had never dreamed of going to India. South America, yes; Spain, yes, but never thought of going to India,” Naranjo said.

Yoga “just fits in to my life, as far as the self-discovery (aspect of the practice). I think something inside me, from a young child, was always looking for more in life, like there’s something inside that’s deeper and richer than just going to work, coming home, watching TV, get up, go to work, do that same thing.”

She spent some time in India and Nepal practicing yoga and travelling, and when she returned to Ketchikan, continued to practice. Naranjo opened the yoga studio in February of this year, and said she hopes to have Vakkalanka return or to host other yoga guests in the future.

Naranjo said she especially values how yoga helps yogis to discover themselves, but Vakkalanka said the individual is both bigger than, but also just as big as, one person.

“Yoga philosophy teaches us that the universe is as much part of us as we are part of the universe,” Vakkalanka said. “We are all micro-universes, basically. ... Yoga philosophy goes very deeply in the macrocosm, as well as the microcosm, and explores the relationship between these two and teaches us how to use the tools that are available to us — such as meditative capability, even language or music — (and) how to use them to make sure that we are aligned with the universe, because if we think about it, this entire universe is like a beautiful orchestra.”

“Everybody is contributing to this universal melody, but we have so much cacophony inside of us,” he said, “that we fail to hear (and) listen to this beautiful melody.”

“Now the yoga practice teaches how to use music to calm down the negative chatter of the mind,” Vakkalanka added. “You know, the mind is always running like a crazy monkey here and there, but now yoga helps us to focus, calm down, concentrate, and listen to the melody inside of us as well as outside of us, so life feels like a beautiful journey rather than an uphill task.”

purpose of our life, we will not be able to achieve fulfillment in life. Many people confuse fulfillment of life with fulfillment of desires. Those two things are very separate,” he said. “You can have all your desires fulfilled, but life itself may not be fulfilled. There can be a certain metaphysical emptiness in life if we do not know the purpose of it.”

Vakkalanka said he knows the power of the Bhagavad Gita firsthand. A native of Hyderabad, India, Vakkalanka was both trained in the yogic tradition and educated in a “quite regular” education system. As an adult, he became an accountant and eventually the chief financial officer of an international company based in Singapore that had him living and working in Africa and Denver, Colorado.

“I felt a really strong calling and was drawn to yoga and yoga philosophy,” Vakkalanka said, adding, “I talked earlier about fulfillment of life versus fulfillment of desires, so that was a question that I had to face at one point in time in my life. In 2008, I decided I was going to give up the comfort of a regular paycheck and salary and benefits and stuff and instead seek out the adventures of teaching yoga philosophy. It has worked out well so far.”

Now Vakkalanka lives in Toronto, Canada, and works as a full-time Sanskrit expert, sitar artist, keynote speaker, yoga philosopher, and meditation instructor. He travels all over the world to lead retreats and workshops. Vakkalanka said he is now in Shanghai for a similar workshop series and begins a European tour in mid-August.

Naranjo said she learned of Vakkalanka through a yoga e-mail newsletter she subscribed to after visiting India