

TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA

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So you want to Make a Difference?

Making Right is so much better

You've heard it said — on packed morning TriMets, in Starbucks' snaking coffee lines, at Nel Centro's heavenly happy hour — "I just want to make a difference." Okay. So this essay's about that, about making a difference. And more. It's about making better our shared achy little planet. Here and now.

And sure, to be honest, I'm saying all this because I'm suddenly old. I mean, our wobbly world over, tired ricepickers about my age begin bargaining with God over what we've done well, balanced against promises we've broken. Promises big and little.

So okay, this essay's about redemption, to put it in old-school spiritual terms. Putting it into a more urban hip way, this essay is really about "Making Right." Making right how we live.

The thing is, if that grumpy gate-keeping archangel were to credit-check me next Tuesday night, on promises kept and people betrayed — I'd have to argue: "Well Sir, I did pretty good. I mean, if you cal-cu-late my average score, over 40 years of adult life. Right?"

"Redemption, mon cher," he'd say, as revered prophets everywhere have always said, "is never-ever too late."

We can Make Right, right now and right here. And indeed, this explains why I spent September 12, real early to way late, at AILA's annual Refugee Adjustment Day. RAD, they call it. AILA, stands for American Immigration Lawyers Association.

Pero please, I implore you, say not a word of this to those tough and tender Lao sisters who organized that entire sweaty Saturday effort. It's best they not know my motivation was more about my karmic credit score than about those 400 or so deeply wounded Rohingya, exhausted Zomi and Karen, stubbornly resilient Somalis, broken-hearted and broken-boned Arabs and Central Africans, all packed into Catholic Charities of Oregon's third and fourth floors. About me trying to make right. By doing right.

Making Right

Jah tentu (yes, of course), I'm improving my score in prep for that day I breathe my last. That final report card is so much more important than those other scores that'll land you or me a preferred mortgage loan or a low-interest Prius. Or not.

Which gets me to the real point of this essay: That personal redemption is actually about the same as our country's redemption. You and me making right, adds up to America Making Right. Doing good.

Our corner of this generous continent needs some reflection on the excesses of our past.

Our policy and opinion leaders have scored high, have earned great respect everywhere, for the awesome concrete, glass, and steel infrastructural capital they wisely banked; for the amazing financial and technological assets they've leveraged. River City's robust mainstream and our 70-or-so ethnic streams running through here, are beneficiaries of all that.

But the past 40 years — take your pick,

mine or America's — have also placed us in some rather deep social and spiritual deficits. Inside our last four decades, the United States has warred on others 17 times. Seventeen. Our irresistible military has crushed kids, parents, and grandparents where each studies, works, shops, prays. Often setting off societal chaos and mass migrations, causing more families even more misery.

International migrants' desperation fills our evening news. Baby Aylan lying so alone on that Turkish strand, hurts us all. So bad. And global gateway cities respond — San Franciscans give sanctuary; Jordanians and Greeks give what little they have to give; Germans give all of us bold leadership. And two Saturdays ago, Portlanders were doing it too. Doing good. Making Right.

Doing good, on S.E. Powell

Here's what happened, and if you're like me — looking to raise your humanitarian credits — here's what those ridiculously optimistic Lao sisters are asking from us to do again on November 14. Another sweaty Saturday.

We could not process them all. Anxious and exhausted refugees lined up an hour before doors opened at Catholic Charities of Oregon. They patiently packed sidewalks at the corner of S.E. 28th and Powell. Word quickly spread that those smart-alecky Lao ladies and American lawyers were telling refugee neighbors to fill Safeway shopping bags with every important-looking paper from every kitchen drawer, and to haul it all to Catholic Charities. To fix everyone's U.S. immigration status. To fix it, for free.

Quick parenthetical: "Refugee" means your country's leaders persecuted you due to your ethnicity, race, or beliefs. Rwandans for their tribe. Russians for their Christianity. Rohingya for their Islam. Iraqis for their belief in America. Refugees are "paroled" into the U.S. "Parole" means the U.S. admits you, but if you mess up, you're shipped out. A year of good parole makes you eligible to apply for "Permanent Resident Alien" status. If your application's accepted, all kinds of American rights will protect you and those you love. And if you continue behaving well for another five years, you become eligible to apply for U.S. citizenship. If your application's approved, you're granted those privileges people everywhere, always dream of.

"Fix it for free" means those lovely Lao ladies convinced local lawyers, paralegals, Lewis & Clark law students; FBI and Portland Police officers, Multnomah County and State of Oregon staffers; Arab and Persian, African and Asian, community elders and civic activists to raise their good-guy scores, for free. Over 50 volunteers gave their love and their time.

"Free" also means official fee waivers will be filed for all our bewildered asylum-seeking families. Free means thousands and thousands of hard-earned low-wage Portland dollars — otherwise laid down to properly document these proud parents, elegant elders, and their hundreds of pretty babies — go instead to



Attorney Chanpone Sinlapasai-Okamura (foreground) gestures to 50 civic activists during Refugee Adjustment Day, also known as RAD, an event sponsored by the American Immigration Lawyers Association.

rent, groceries, and nice clothes to show proper respect to our kids' teachers this time of year.

So we try some more

This is not to say that our RAD (Refugee Adjustment Day) was pain-free. Not at all. Our sheer volume of worried parents and grandparents, of over-worked volunteer childcare providers and energetic kids, of gasping elevators and air conditioners, finally tripped the big fuse box. Killed the lights and the A.C. Compassion is costly.

And all those good people who humbly made our RAD Saturday possible — both settled Portlanders and those Portlanders whose hearts and bones ached in all the places broken by our own refugee journeys here — cried and laughed and cried some more.

Then, the entire house hushed as Catholic Charities executive director Dr. Richard Birkel took the mic to make an inevitable announcement. Iraqi civic activist Ahmed Al Zubaidi tightened his python arm grip on me. With the kindness that comes from having done very hard things, with the moral authority that comes from age and stewardship of the Catholic church's good work, Dr. Birkel said he was sorry that we could not keep our promise to every family packed in here, now. Many must come back on November 14. For us to care for them. He said he was grateful to all of us, for doing our very-very best. Silence filled the place. Disappointed families left the building, left this nice side of town. Compassion hurts.

So okay, everyone knows how being bad is easy, how doing good is hard. Making Right the world of hurt we all share has always, everywhere, required sacrifice from each of us. And all that guarantees raising your good-person profile. Your karmic credit score. So when that grumpy archangel raises his skeptical brow and looks you straight in the eye, asking what

My Turn: Musings on white privilege

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go-to person for white people to talk about race. They're comfortable with me in that role simply because they relate to me as a white person. Sometimes as a test of my race barometer, white people seek my approval when they knowingly make a racial comment or joke. It's almost as if they are children testing the boundaries of what they can get away with.

Contrary to what some people might think, I'm uncomfortable being part of an all-white group. I feel less awkward when I'm with a mixture of people of color. Sometimes I get annoyed when nonwhite people assume I'm white, but often I casually mention my identity as part of conversations. It can be tricky, but I've

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good you've done ...

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To learn more, or to volunteer, please contact Chanpone Sinlapasai-Okamura or Toc Soneoulay-Gillespie, whose information is listed below, under "tough and tender Lao sisters."

The Asian Reporter's Expanding American Lexicon

Mon cher (French): My dear. A small thank you to Africa House manager and community elder Djimet Dogo. French is one of four languages he brought to RAD. Merci beaucoup, mon frère.

Ricepickers (Attributed to our late, still much loved, Uncle Max): Used here to mean "Asians," because back home, this U.S. Census Bureau category has no cache. Khmer and Kareni and Koreans don't see each other as sharing a lot. Not enough for a common identity grouping, like "Asian." Except, of course, around rice. Ricelovers. Ricepickers.

Tough and tender Lao sisters: Chanpone Sinlapasai-Okamura, attorney at law, president of the board of directors of IRCO (Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization), and Toc Soneoulay-Gillespie, MSW, director of refugee resettlement, Catholic Charities of Oregon. Let them know you can help. Chanpone can be contacted at <chanpone@m2io.com> or (503) 607-0444, and Toc can be contacted at <tsoneoulay@catholiccharitiesoregon.org> or (503) 231-4866.

Warring 17 times: Viet Nam, Cambodia, Laos, Lebanon, Panama, Nicaragua, Granada, Serbia, Sudan, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Iraq II, Pakistan, Yemen, Libya, Syria.

Worldwide misery: While it would be overstatement to fault U.S. foreign policy for failed states sending families fleeing for their lives, or for regimes failing to provide jobs for parents trying to love their children, it is arguably true that unkind American commerce and brute military power contribute to today's unprecedented levels of forced human migrations. In any case, blame is less meaningful than lending a helping hand. Here and now.

learned different ways of revealing my secret Asian woman self.

I often reflect on how much of what I've accomplished in my career is because, despite being a woman, I was afforded certain opportunities because it was assumed I was white. I question my actions and reactions to the outside world. I wonder about the part of me that is as assertive as my pushy mom as well as the part that has learned to expect a certain kind of treatment because I'm mistaken for a white woman. It also makes me ponder how many more opportunities a white man might be afforded. These are not questions most mono-racial people think about everyday, but for this biracial Asian/white combo of a woman, it's a way of life.

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