

TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA

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After Syria, and after Paris

As *Asian Reporter* readers know, I'm good at digging for data on T.J. Maxx down-escalators; I excel at eavesdropping at our Mexican cousin Antonio's Mall 205 Denny's, at snooping in PacWest's snaking Starbucks line. It's how I've always surveyed Portlanders. It's never been good science. That I leave to Ms. Lisha Shrestha. Our new policy researcher. And analyst. Very sciency.

It must be done. Polling River City's moods. Regularly. Discreetly. And not just by me. Listening discreetly then thinking quietly then speaking mindfully is what all community mechanics are expected to do. We do it in our sending countries, we do it in Portland's mainstream, we do it in our 70 ethnic streams. It's our duty. The duty of elder aunties without the reach of mainstream policymakers, educators, and media. It's the work of big uncles, guys without the muscle of cops and courts, ground or air forces. Back home or right here, it's what we do.

And today, we hear people are mad about Paris. People are sad about Syria. Meaning "Paris," and "Syria," as shorthand for some very complex and painful problems. Abbreviations, in the same way "Ferguson" or "New Orleans" or "Tiananmen Square" mean so much more than a place-name on Mapquest.com.

Of course Portlanders are upset. The grim faces of many public-policy leaders — the majority of U.S. House reps, 30 of 50 state governors, among them — pack our evening news. Each is saying *no* to families fleeing the Islamic State's murderous march; *no* to cities robust as ours fleeing the combined aerial bombardments of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, the United States, Russia, Saudi Arabia, France, Jordan, Bahrain, Iran, Denmark, Netherlands, Australia, Canada. Imagine the crush of their mechanized cruelty. Imagine it hitting your home, your wife's office, your son's school, all their tomorrows.

Amok neighbor boys with machetes and garden tools were enough, more than enough, to chase a half-million of our community out into our hungry sea when I was one of those terrified kids, holding tight our determined pop's sweaty hand. Some of us got out, many of ours did not. Oh ampun'illaah. The U.K. says their Royal Air Force will commence operations over Syria by Christmas.

The Big Q and the Best A

We know how hard it is for Oregonians to hear the news from Paris and the speeches from U.S. presidential candidates. Harder is knowing what we should do, about all those voices blaming frightened refugees for all that bad news. How do Portland Arab, African, and Muslim community mechanics deal with headlines and campaign rhetoric coupling our families with the so-called Islamic State's soldiers murdering 130, injuring another 353. Each an innocent, just enjoying a Paris Friday night. Most of them under 30. From 19 nations.

Deciding what to feel and what to do is

hard. Syria and Paris are not the beginning or the end of this awful episode. This shared chapter. This past year: Soldiers, lone wolves, and crazies, either actually directed or purportedly inspired by the Islamic State's caliph Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, have murdered nearly 1,000 worshippers, workers, shoppers, vacationers, strollers, young and old. Fifty-two attacks in 12 countries, on four continents. Including the May 3, 2015 failed assault on an animators conference in Garland, Texas. There will be more attacks. In many more places. For sure.

We will share much more anguish. We will have more murders in western cities, places most U.S. policy leaders, educators, and media, most identify with. We will bear much more grief across Arabian, African, and Asian communities. These are certainties.

Also certain is the combined individual, communal, and spiritual tolls each next atrocity will surely take on our several Portland ethnic streams — those vigorous systems of people, monies, and ideas circulating between here and there and back again.

Uncertain is what we are going to do between each next explosive episode. The Big Q is: What I am supposed to do with data from my not-so-sciency surveillance of River City shoppers, breakfasters, and coffee drinkers?

And the Best A is: We do what we've always done. We do what we did before our homelands' ugly politics expelled us; we do what resettling Irish, German, Polish, Norwegian, Austrian, Jewish, and Italiano elder aunties and big uncles working this extraordinary new continent have also always done.

We embrace our boys and our fathers; we feel their anger and anxieties. We reassure our resourceful daughters, mothers, and grandmas; we nurture our nurturers. We expect every community opinion leader — Muslim and Christian, Hindu and Buddha sangha, alike — to lean into each of our blessed prophets' teachings about trusting in the unspeakable grandness of God. Trusting the humbling beauty of our vast universe, and the generosity of River City's dank soil. Trusting the common sense, the creativity, and the kindness of Americans. All great gifts, these are. All bigger than those murderous demons. All better than our shrill politicians. All truer than our fears.

Then back to work

Then we get back to work. The good work of ethnic-stream elders and civic activists. Back to solving school problems, police problems, family problems, community problems. The work we're good at.

Like the work we did some Saturdays ago, when 50 lawyers, legal assistants, law students, teachers, social workers, cops, business owners, our teenagers, our city's mayor and first lady — in the words of relief organizer Toc Soneoulay, "Contributed their patience, flexibility, resilience, commitment, strategizing



Arab Portlanders feel cared for by Portland mayor Charlie Hales (second from right) and first lady Nancy Hales (right) at a November Catholic Charities of Oregon refugee family-resettlement event. (AR Photo/Ronault L.S. "Polo" Catalani)

expertise, their trust in one another, and a certain level of humility," in making that Saturday's refugee family-assistance event "an absolute success." That's what we do. And we do it so well.

Each Portlander gave what each owns. Some gave professional skills, while some handed over their hearts; Mayor and Madame Hales gave reassurance in kind tones; teenagers brought their bright energy.

We did it again, the following Saturday. Multnomah County's community-involvement director Gary Marschke hosted Abdiasis Mohamed's African Leadership Institute. Together they set the table for Portlanders from Mother Africa. Elders and young activists from Benin, Chad, Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, and Somalia, immediately inventoried their communal strengths, then applied these assets to current urgencies.

Two leadership generations of two of our achy earth's great religious traditions, quickly prioritized easing Muslim schoolkids' needs, ahead of many-many more local exigencies. We had an exemplary Saturday of community

"Patience, flexibility, resilience, commitment, strategizing expertise ... trust in one another, and a certain level of humility." (What makes a community *mechanico*.)

— Toc Soneoulay

mechanics doing what we know and what we do, best. Fixing our families' problems.

We're good at practical things. At addressing our young folks' anger. At hearing our fathers' humiliations. At absorbing our mothers' anxieties. Maybe we can also fix the source of our families' sorrows. Maybe we cannot. But nobody leaves our Saturday kitchen table feeling unheard and unloved. Nobody.

And before we leave our seats, we'll leverage all the joy and all the grace our ancient and elegant cultures bring to this day and to this country. These assets also belong to us. In fact, this wealth *is* us — our envied banks of social, cultural, and spiritual capital. They're what River City's mainstream and our ethnic streams all long for. Our living treasures.

Okay it's agreed, I'm not so good at capturing statistically competent societal climate data. Not with my old-school tool bag. And just as surely, River City's community mechanics are not adept at manhandling misguided soldiers, lone wolves, psychopathic killers, and of course all those cynical people benefitting from the chaos raised by those bad guys. These tasks we best leave to the pros.

We're best doing what we know and what we do, best. Ayoh-ayoh (let's go-go-go).

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