

# The Asian Reporter

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Please send all correspondence to: The Asian Reporter  
 922 N Killingsworth Street, Suite 2D, Portland, OR 97217  
 Phone: (503) 283-4440, Fax: (503) 283-4445

News Department e-mail: news@asianreporter.com  
 Advertising Department e-mail: ads@asianreporter.com  
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 Website: www.asianreporter.com

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Publisher **Jaime Lim**  
 Contributing Editors

**Ronault L.S. Catalani (Polo), Jeff Wenger**  
 Correspondents

**Ian Blazina, Josephine Bridges, Pamela Ellgen, Maileen Hamto, Edward J. Han, A.P. Kryza, Marie Lo, Simeon Mamaril, Julie Stegeman, Toni Tabora-Roberts, Allison Voigts**

Illustrator **Jonathan Hill**  
 News Service **Associated Press/Newsfinder**

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**MY TURN**

■ **Dmae Roberts**



## Listening

Active listening takes work. I've learned this from many years of interviewing people. I have in the past been criticized for interrupting people while conversing, especially with men. Perhaps that's a reason I became a professional interviewer for radio; I found that holding a microphone and recording people's thoughts made me focus wholly on listening without interruption.

A good interview highlights a conversation between two or more people. Even though you're asking questions, you're also involved in the dialogue. Eye contact, facial cues, and appropriate head nodding as communication all encourage an interviewee to continue talking. Showing interest, keeping an open mind, and creating a comfortable environment inspires people to share their thoughts and feelings.

Through active listening, I've now become a facilitator in panel discussions for my artistic projects as well as at conferences where I've been asked to speak and moderate. The skill has come in handy for discussions I've lead about mixed-race people and the issues they deal with, held as part of the "Conversation Project," a series presented by Oregon Humanities.

Following the inauguration of the 45th U.S. president, my listening skills were put to the test. I was stunned by the outcome of the election. I e-mailed and phoned friends. I combed through Facebook comments to try to find people who shared my anxiety about the coming years. Conversations became divisive and emotions grew more heated, not just online, but with members of my own family. I had arguments with my brother who, through the years, has become unrecognizably conservative. We got into a shouting match when he quoted "facts" he found on alt-right blogs. I also discovered some of my in-laws supported and voted for the current president. I wondered how I could ever speak with them again. But I had the most difficult time talking with my husband.

When my husband Richard and I met 20 years ago, he was a Republican like his family had been. As a lifelong Democrat, I debated whether I could continue dating him. Through our conversations, I learned he was a fiscal conservative and party affiliation didn't matter to him. We found common ground on the topics of civil rights and equity. As we continued talking and dating, he changed his voter

registration to Independent and now he's a registered Democrat.

After the recent election, I wondered if he had gone back to being a fiscal conservative. I was emotional and had a difficult time understanding this new America where blatant racism, homophobia, xenophobia, and sexism seemed acceptable. The rise in hate crimes and violence, the travel bans on Muslims, and the detainment of immigrants — even green-card holders — stymied me.

Richard and I got into terrible arguments. I wanted to vent and I felt hurt when he didn't agree with me. I thought he was discounting my fear and began to wonder who this man was that I've been married to for 18 years. I frankly didn't want to listen to him. I wanted to be heard. I wanted him to feel as scared as I was so I could find comfort in that.

It became so painful to talk to him that I gave up. Then I remembered my listening skills. I asked myself, "What if he was a stranger I was interviewing?"

As I quelled my emotions after hearing news a second Muslim ban had been issued that would affect my friends, colleagues, and me personally, I began our conversations with a question, not a statement. Rather than saying, "That idiot did this today," I asked, "What do you think about what happened today?" It took the emotion out of the beginning of the conversation and allowed him to respond. I realized when I opened with a strong emotional statement, my husband would shut down so it wouldn't affect him. After I started asking him his thoughts first, he would open up and was more receptive when I told him my views.

I still have strong feelings about what is happening to our government and the future of this country, but we need to truly listen to one another and talk without becoming emotional. I continue to find solace in comments on social media that I can relate to. I also try to read the comments of conservatives in order to better understand them. That doesn't mean I won't have passionate views; if anything, it makes me more committed to taking action. I want to be effective and reach people. In order to do that, I must listen to all sides. While I may never fully understand some viewpoints, we can avoid emotional discussions that might be more destructive than helpful, and we can actually listen to each other.

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