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TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA

■ Polo



Beauty among our broken dishes, broken bones

Nowadays our achy little earth seems she's slipped a degree or two off axis. City sidewalks seem to be buckling, tectonic plates are rubbing. People already on edge, are tumbling right off it.

Tense times like these, can lock us into tribes. Imagine the other as evil. Check out congress. But human history is inspiring for our new ways of thinking then going about our daily business when our natural or social environs shifted off an accustomed center. Our family for example, is from Indonesia. Our quaking ground and tantruming volcanoes, our awful leaders and those invading armies, one after another, all hungry for our soil and our oil, have shaped us into a very adaptive people. We've always had to sort for blessings among our broken dishes and broken bones.

All that, is intended to ramp into my essay about a Saturday afternoon in January. It's a story about glimpsing a world of possibility, when old adversarial ways will no longer do. It's a story about us. About Portlanders.

It unfolded at River City's international airport, under that vaulting arc of glass and tubular iron sheltering PDX's arrival gates. We were gathering on three lanes closed for a Saturday protest. Chilly Chinook winds were gusting through. That irrepressible Bhutan refugee and American dreamer, Som Nath Subedi had already secured the Port of Portland's first-ever free speech permit for a demonstration of our affection for refugees. Families our president just banned from flying here. Here, to our generous continent's northwest corner.

Som had received hundreds of Facebook clicks promising to participate in our protest. Most from civil-society organizations and faith associations (official protest sponsor list set out at the end). A few shrill posts came from a band of local bad boys who've earned notoriety for demonstrating against our values. And gotten a lot of press for that.

Gratitude trumps taking for granted

Port of Portland facility managers and public-safety officers had made all the complex accommodations making it possible to balance our free speech against the rest of the public's important business. This is hard to do. Since the

I was imagining one side or both losing their tempers, Port of Portland police arriving, and all kinds of mayhem on local evening news. But then: Something beautiful happened.

chaotic 1960s when our family resettled here, both the federal and state judiciaries have been refining this balancing of contrary interests. So, while gathering to protest our government cannot be prohibited by cops or courts — we can be regulated by considerations over the time, the place, and manner of our demonstration. Obviously, no early morning loudspeakers in leafy neighborhoods. No parades through public schools. No firing pistols in the air.

As anyone from one of Portland's 70-or-so newcomer communities will tell you, America's First Amendment is a beautiful thing. And rare.

So from the perspective of a family from an island archipelago curving along one of our wobbly world's most geologically active regions — I was moved by Port officials' preparedness. They were ready to expose their buzzing facility, their working people, and a travelling public already tense over declining airline services — to us. They secured us a very visible protest space. They raised us a stage, they even lined up portable potties.

As extraordinary as respectful government is, in a world of hurt, what happened next is an even more promising human possibility.

As our crowd swelled and packed tighter, as our speakers and performers queued up for the stage, about a dozen anti-us protestors pushed to the front. They were big men. They used harsh words and a squawky megaphone. They were supposed to be sequestered at a distant counter-demonstration space.

This was bad. Our on-stage guys and these off-stage guys were soon shouting at the same volume. Sharing the same tenor and tone.

Collision and a crack of light

I was worrying about how to manage two hours of this. I was watching our crowd of church folk, of

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