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TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA



■ Polo

American disability in a world of hurt, and joy

I am a refugee from Indonesia. And I'm American too — a beneficiary of our shared continent's abundance. Being this blend means a lot. For families like ours, it means today's long summer days are very different from July 2016, six months before our otherwise kind and creative nation went into one of those recurring mood swings. The ugly kind, our kids' history books tell them all about. Sure they do.

Today, roughly 1-in-5 Portlanders are foreign born. Beaverton is 1-in-4. And these stats don't include indivisible parts of us — our U.S.-born wives, our bright children and grandchildren. And you know, this mix means so much too. Healthy American schools, businesses, faith and civil-society associations, require a vigorous rub of Native, settled, and New Americans. Sure we do. Surely we always have.

Our elegant Indo ethnic community is part of this beautiful noise. In fact, we've contributed to that transnational love affair with America since 1944. Since polite soldierboys named Red (Lakota) and Tex (Mejicano) and Guinea (Italiano) and Detroit (Polsk) crushed Imperial Japan's brutal occupation army. Since Yanks rebuilt our school, then made us swings and seesaws from construction leftovers. Our first playground. Ever.

Seventy years later and 17,000 miles west, our elders still weep about the Sunday morning these guys, also crying, left us. For home. Home, where moms and girlfriends missed them so. These idealists, those elders still insist, are our "real Americans."

Two dark decades of civil warring shamed our nascent Indonesian nation before we finally fled our home. When at last we arrived in Hoboken, N.J., "small, sweaty, and brown" — pirating a quote from Multnomah County commissioner-elect Susheela Jayapal on her 1978 U.S. arrival — customs cops only inspected our two hastily stuffed steamer trunks. They didn't document our Costco shopping cart-sized cache of social and spiritual wealth. Those very assets that secured our health and happiness through three preceding centuries of Netherlands colonial cruelty.

Two sides of our American coin

When our train pulled into Salem, and we rested

Maybe unlike me, many Portlanders don't weep shamelessly, don't stumble for days after — no matter how many oceans or decades, university degrees or regular paychecks, separate my debilitating memories from our shared present. Maybe we all better get this together, today.

in a tidy house generously filled by Westminster Presbyterian Church elders, Mamma carefully unpacked all our humbling pain into our bottom dresser drawers. Into top drawers, she neatly folded 800 millennia of uninterrupted love for *kualarga* (family) and *comunidad*, our bond with our pretty planet and mysterious God. Together, we are this hurt and this joy. This wealth, not transferable into 24-hour ATMs, is what lab-jacketed social scientists call "cultural capital."

These sacred bonds are easily missed by U.S. port officials. Portland policy leaders don't include their value to municipal budgets. But, when our wealth stirs well with Oregon banks of staid institutionalized capital, this merger accounts for our envied nation's uncontested place on our achey little earth. For our shared future. For sure.

Here's how it works: Our Salem-born kids are Old World-raised and U.S.-educated. Their polite daughters are brave and beautiful. Traditionalism fused with American hipness makes us as fluent in River City's mainstream as we are in our vigorous ethnic streams. We arc over oceans east and west, confidently solving problems. We jumbo jet to continents that took weeks to cross when I was our eager granddaughter Jettaya's age. Back when only shaman Auntie Kris, peepers squeezed tight, could communicate over time and space. Today, any *tolol* with two thumbs, an iPhone, and okay credit can FaceTime anywhere, anytime.

Today *tambien*, Portland's 70 ethnic-stream elders worry late nights about our more settled neighbors who don't live inside family histories of bottomless sorrow, of blessed joy. About how these Americans don't reminisce about fragrant rains or gossipy Eucalyptus who eased us into sleep, back home. How they don't long for patient aunties translating all that living into meaning.

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