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TALKING STORY IN ASIAN AMERICA



■ Polo

Why we can't fix nothing

Jah tentu (yup for sure, in Indo patois) next Saturday early I'm borrowing my best bud Alberto's cherry 1967 GMC pickup. And I'm hauling a ton of orange Craftsman power tools, Stanley socket sets, even that vintage pig-iron hand auger our dear Pop grabbed for some odd reason just before we sprinted for our lives off our beloved Spice Islands — off to Ted's Tool Shed they go. Way out on S.E. Powell.



We agreed to a division of labor and love that relieved Anglo America of its responsibility to make room, to make ideal, to make peace. Policy leaders held on to their intermittent appearances to make nice.

Of course, me telling you about next weekend's purge is just a literary trick to seduce your peepers into sticking to my essay. And sure, *Why we can't fix nothing* is an attention-grabber. A concession to our shrill times. Overstated improper English is normal now.

Shameless starts aside, I promise some substance at this essay's core. Important stuff. Actually, a simple proposition that took me 50 sweaty years to work into the 1,200 words that follow. Five decades, from our just-arrived refugee family's 1968 heartbreaks over the murders of Bobby Kennedy and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., all the way to mayor Tom Potter's 2008 invitation to Portland's 70 newcomer communities to participate in local democracy. Right up to last week.

And that proposition is: We cannot fix the unjust and unkind societal machines we've built, they daily disable us all. By "we" I mean my generation of stubborn community mecanicos. By "disable us all" I mean both the dehumanization of folks on top, the kind leaving no bruises. And the distortion of our families below.

We are not up to fixing our damaging institutions. Not us refugees from colonialism. Not our tried-and-true American minority leaders. Not our mainstream's elected officials with their armies of 8-to-5 public administrators. Surely not Oregon's staid captains of finance, manufacture, or trade. Not now, not here, on our shared northwest corner of this grand continent.

Scaling from the macro to me and you
 By leading these institutions, some Americans make billions. By carefully conforming, most of us make middle class. By just complying, many communities avoid social and economic isolation. The "others," those startling lot of us who cannot smooth in — America shoots dead or locks tight or deports. We all play our part. My complicity level allows me to buy weekly groceries. New Seasons. To

pay monthly rent. Westside. To dress well our pretty kids, every next school year.

Our institutions overwhelm. Standing up against one is like standing on any weekday morning MAX track. Accordingly, my 2018 goals are more modest. My 50th year as an earnest participant in our American experiment will amount to no more than a sorting of my contribution to it all. My part, is all I can possibly know. And all I can manhandle.

This accounting starts with evaluating what all newcomer communities do amazingly well, year after exhausting year. Everywhere. Which is adapt-adapt-adapt. My grandparents and parents conformed to four regimes; inside my and my brothers' lifetimes our family adjusted three more times. We are as tough and elegant as bamboo. This flexibility plus those knucklehead Craftsman and Stanley tools I'm trucking to Ted's Tool Shed next weekend, have made all of us happy and healthy. Al'hamdulillaah. Thank God.

After adaptiveness, the second thing I do well is self-discipline. Our grandpa, our pop, and his four boys were all athletes. Even though South Salem High and I failed each other, sports got me into universities. Adrenaline is my performance-enhancing drug of choice.

The fear hormone has fuelled my over-training for coaches, my over-producing on cannery and warehouse floors, my over-preparing for courts, legislatures, downtown boardrooms, Middle

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