



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Honoring Our Ancestors

Rev. Christina Shu, Affiliated Community
Minister

May 8, 2016

301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@neighborhooduu.org

Earlier this year I attended a minister's retreat in Philadelphia called, Finding Our Way Home. This retreat is an annual gathering of religious professionals in the Unitarian Universalist Association who identify as people of color. I instantly connected with another minister, the Reverend Cathy Chang, also an Asian-American woman, and also a healthcare chaplain like myself. Cathy told the following story, "More than once, when people ask me where I'm from, and I say 'Taiwan,' they respond by saying, 'I love Thai food!' I have to show them on a map, where Taiwan is, and where Thailand is." Before we laugh too hard, remember that Cathy was describing something that happened to her *at a Unitarian Universalist church*.

May is Asian Pacific Islander American Heritage Month. People of Asian and Pacific Island heritage are incredibly rich and diverse in their patterns of immigration, cultures, languages, spiritual backgrounds, and more. To generalize us as the model minority, or to say "we all look the same," or worse, to believe an Asian character in Hollywood could be better portrayed by Scarlett Johansson, is insulting. If you don't get the reference, ask me after the service. It's hard to really do justice to the complexity and vast spread of the Asian American experience in one sermon. In fact, I was hesitant to preach about this topic, precisely because I was worried it would be inadequate or too simplistic, or that it would be seen as a token, exotic, or a "one-time" topic. I think I should make it clear, Asian American stories are American stories, and they are Unitarian Universalist stories. I was also worried about preaching today because, it's Mother's Day, and my mother might be in the audience, and I was speaking about ancestors, a favorite topic of hers. It's like the ultimate family history test.

I grew up in east San Diego County, went to multicultural and ethnically diverse public schools, and also grew up UU and went to a church with a predominantly white congregation. The spiritual background of my childhood was not, as some might assume, Buddhist or Confucian, but was lighting a chalice at the dinner table and learning about Hindu mythology and Wicca in Sunday school. I love that my parents chose this faith for their children, it has been a gift to me, and led me into my calling and vocation as a minister. Another gift that my parents gave me was a sense of legacy, of being part of history, and of seeing my life and choices in connection with generations that stretched far behind me.

In 2010, two Emory University psychologists, doctors Robyn Fivush and Marshall Duke, conducted a study published in a paper called, "Do You Know? The power of family history in adolescent identity and well-being."¹ This Do You Know study asked 66 children, 20 yes or no questions, all centered around knowledge of family history and stories. For example, raise your hand if you know how your parents met? How your grandparents met? Where your grandparents grew up?

¹ <http://shared.web.emory.edu/emory/news/releases/2010/03/children-benefit-if-they-know-about-their-relatives-study-finds.html> and <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/17/fashion/the-family-stories-that-bind-us-this-life.html?pagewanted=all& r=1>

The Do You Know study found that children who knew more stories about their families showed “higher levels of emotional well-being, better family functioning, lower anxiety, fewer behavioral problems and higher resiliency.” When the study became public, parents rushed to find out exactly what the questions were, so they too could make sure that their children knew the correct family stories and could do well in school and life. However, the researchers cautioned, it was not the content of the stories, but rather, the process of passing stories on, that matters greatly to a child’s well-being and development. Stories were passed from generation to generation. Stories were passed during family dinners, yearly vacations and holidays. The original researcher Marshall Duke wrote, “It is this intergenerational self and the personal strength and moral guidance that seem to derive from it that are associated with increased resilience, better adjustment, and improved chances of good clinical and educational outcomes.”²

I like this idea of an “intergenerational self,” which leads to strength, resilience, and moral guidance. It is what we try to create here at Neighborhood, through intergenerational worship, through inclusion of people of all ages in story-telling, and through helping our youth come of age. And we are also intergenerational in telling our church history, celebrating our own Neighborhood Church ancestors, and our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors. We speak about the “great cloud of witnesses” and the saints, whose dreams are ours to carry forward. Here’s an ancestor who inspires me to carry out her dream.

My maternal grandmother’s name was Beulah Kwoh. She was born in 1923, in Stockton California, the only child of Chinese immigrants from southern China. As a young adult, she was active in Christian youth groups and through these groups, met my grandfather Edwin Kwoh. After having two children, teaching sociology at LA Community College and running her local church nursery school, she was hired initially to be a dialect coach on the movie, *Love Is a Many Splendored Thing* in 1954. She was so talented that the director hired her to play one of the parts on screen, and this was the beginning of her acting career.

I remember my grandmother as out-going, social, charismatic, a great fund-raiser, speech-giver, great cook, and great fashionista. She could talk just about anyone into joining her cause, and she had a lot of causes. Number one was making sure that Asian Americans were more equally, diversely, and respectfully depicted on television and movies. She founded the East West Players in 1965, the country’s first Asian American theater company, which is still going in Little Tokyo. She supported Asian American actors, playwrights, directors, creators and dreamers.

One of my strongest memories of seeing my grandmother act live on stage, is also a memory of when she was most persistent and passionate in the struggle for civil rights and justice. In 1982, a young Chinese American man named Vincent Chin, was murdered in Detroit. This was a hate crime, committed by two white men, autoworkers who blamed their lack of jobs on the

² http://www.huffingtonpost.com/marshall-p-duke/the-stories-that-bind-us-_b_2918975.html

popularity of Japanese cars, and who beat Vincent to death with a baseball bat. For this crime, the two men were given a sentence of probation and \$3,000 in fines, with no jail time. Vincent was survived by his single mother, Lily Chin. After his death, she spent the rest of her life speaking out for justice, saying that she never wanted any mother to lose their child the way she did. Sadly, we know that there are too many mothers who have lost their children to racial violence, and that many of these perpetrators still have not faced any jail time.

When my grandmother heard Vincent Chin's story, she invited his mother Lily to her home in Los Angeles. After hearing Lily's story, over the next few years she worked with a playwright friend of hers, fundraised, and organized, resulting in a play called "Carry the Tiger to the Mountain," which performed around the country. Through this play, she raised awareness for Vincent Chin's case, and for the on-going need to defend against hate crimes, and seek out equal justice for all. My grandmother played the role of Lily Chin.³

I would not have known about Vincent Chin or Lily Chin, had it not been for my grandmother's advocacy, and for seeing her on stage in that difficult, but so important role. In seeing this play, I grew my own awareness of my identity as a Chinese American woman, and what it means to use my voice to amplify the voices of others. Vincent Chin's case became a rallying cry against anti-Asian racism and violence. My grandmother's example showed me what it means to take empathy for a mother's grief, and use it to further a civil rights movement.

I have no doubt that if my grandmother was alive today, she would be a fan of the movement APIs 4 Black Lives, which is a joining of Asians and Pacific Islanders in solidarity with Black Lives Matter. I think she would love the hashtag, Model Minority Mutiny, which asks Asian Americans to stand up and speak out against anti-black racism, and to confront anti-black racism even within communities of color like our own. Too often, the stereotype of Asian Americans as a model minority has been used against black and brown people to create further divisions and reinforce structures of racism and oppression. A Model Minority Mutiny resists being used in these anti-black racist structures, because we recognize that our liberation is interconnected with black liberation and liberation for all.

Writer Soya Jung states, "Model Minority Mutiny is a call not only to those of us with class, skin-color, or gender privilege to examine our complicity in the system. It is an opening to acknowledge the marginalization of those Asian Americans who are most vulnerable to state violence – refugees of war; those targeted by state surveillance and profiling; those trapped in low-wage jobs and the informal economy; those who are incarcerated and formerly incarcerated; those who are undocumented; those who are trans, disabled, queer, cis-women, dark-skinned, Sikh, or Muslim. It is an invitation for Asian Americans to unite across difference

³ For more about Beulah Kwoh and Lily Chin http://advancingjustice-la.org/sites/default/files/UCRS%207_Beulah_Kwoh_story%20r2.pdf and http://advancingjustice-la.org/sites/default/files/UCRS%205_Vincent_Chin_Lily_Chin_story%20r2.pdf

for the long-term work to dismantle the apparatuses of state violence.”⁴ Model Minority Mutiny both lifts up voices of ancestors who did not fit into the stereotypical mold, and carries them forward into our current struggles for justice.

Our stories, our narratives are how we make meaning in the world. We each have ancestral stories. What is your family story? What is your intergenerational narrative? Who told it to you and how? Think of all the stories we hold together in this sanctuary. What are our collective stories?

We are in the midst of great story-telling projects, in this time and this place. One week ago marked the end of Passover, the Jewish holiday devoted to the telling of the story of Exodus, of Moses leading the Israelites to freedom, a story which has inspired many civil rights movements. This month we lift up the stories of Asian and Pacific Islander Americans. Stories like those of Fred Korematsu, a Japanese American who challenged the unconstitutional internment of persons of Japanese descent, over 120,000 people, during WWII, and eventually won. Or the stories of thousands of Filipino Americans who fought in the US military but were denied compensation. Or South Asian Sikhs and Muslims, currently fighting against anti-Muslim harassment, surveillance, and violence.

Every day the 24/7 election coverage gives us each of the candidates’ spin on the American story, the story of where we have been and where we are going and who we should select to take us there? And each of us is constantly creating the story of our lives, understanding ourselves and our connections to one another, and the great arc of history.

So let us ask ourselves, are we telling stories which divide us and pit one group against another? Or are we telling stories which unite us, which celebrate justice, inclusivity, and transformative love? Are we upholding narratives of us versus them, the exclusive and holy few against the feared and criminalized other? Or are listening to the voices that create space for empathy, for compassion, for liberation?

The reading today by Leslie Takahashi Morris asked us to “make our lives sanctuaries, to nurture our many identities.” We each carry complex identities, which are nurtured through the telling of stories, stories of courage, love, justice, and creativity. As the Do You Know study reminds us, passing on intergenerational stories creates resilience, the resilience of being connected to ancestors.

Today is also Mother’s Day. I want to read a bit from the UUA website on Mama’s Day, “Mother’s Day was originally founded as an antiwar rallying cry by Unitarian Julia Ward Howe. Mother’s Day can be more than a day for flowers and pancakes. With “Mamas Day,” we hear a call to honor all those who mother, especially those who bear the brunt of hurtful policies or who are weighed down by stigma in our culture. We celebrate trans mamas, immigrant mamas, single mamas, lesbian mamas, young mamas, poor mamas, and [more.] It’s

⁴ <http://www.racefiles.com/2014/12/13/what-does-model-minority-mutiny-demand/>

an opportunity to take action to create the conditions so that all families can thrive.”⁵ We honor Lily Chin, and other mamas who lost their children to racial violence, and all the mamas who stand with them saying, “No more.” Today is a day when we lift up the stories of mamas, so that we can take action so that all families can thrive, grow, and live freely.

In the play, “Carry the Tiger to the Mountain,” my grandmother, in the role of Lily Chin says, “Mama always want to give children hope. No hope without justice.” Let us carry forward a narrative of hope and justice, remembering that we are connected by threads of love to ancestors far and near, and connected each to one another. Amen and blessed be.

⁵ <http://www.uua.org/reproductive/action/mamas-day>