

“Seeking Peace and Justice in a Time of Othering”

The 42nd Anniversary of the Murder of Vincent Chin

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“Seeking Peace and Justice in a Time of Othering” is an ambitious theme for today’s service. It was proposed by our wise and adventurous friend Roland Hwang.

I grew up in a tiny town in Central Pennsylvania during WW2. I was one of two sons of a Korean American father who was also the pastor of a church. Dad was born in San Francisco. My mother was from German and English ancestry. We were the only “minority” family in that small town and the only Asian family within 90 miles. My mother was born and grew up there, so we were also surrounded by relatives and lots of love. My young life was also coupled with many moments when the “shadows of ignorance” revealed themselves and I felt the heavy sting of “racism”. I remember those years deeply, and from a very young age dedicated myself to work for Peace and Justice.

I had hoped that after more than seventy-five years of working for peace and justice things would have changed. They have, but not always as I hoped.

There is no doubt that we are living in a time of “othering” a time when we humans continue to divide ourselves over many issues. Our beliefs, politics, morals and simply being born who we are place us all in an “other” group.

We seem to accept these divisions, often without question, thus choosing to argue, berate, bully, chastise, condemn, hate or - find in “others” mutual acceptance, companionship, peace, joy, and love.

When Vincent Chin and his friends went to celebrate Vincent’s coming marriage, he entered a place where at least two men sat who noticed Vincent and chose the former options. Out of ignorance, they chose the shadowy side, blindly embracing

beratement, bullying, and chastisement that led to anger, hate, and ultimately to murder.

We Asians have been called the “invisible minority”. Why is it then that when we Asians are noticed, we suddenly become a threat and “the enemy”? That obviously happened to Vincent. There were times when it happened to me and my family. I suspect there were times when it happened to many of you as well.

It happened en masse to Japanese American families living on the West coast who were rounded up, without review, and sent to concentration camps.

It also happened to Japanese cars after Germany had been importing cars for years. Why is it that when we Asians are noticed we become the enemy? It murdered Vincent.

Yes, Vincent’s murder was an act of “othering”. And this year’s recent and unnecessary destruction of the last remnant of Detroit’s Chinatown was also “othering” and an attack on the Chinese community as well as on all Asians living in or near Detroit.

They say that fear is the motivator behind “othering”. We may fear a tall person or and obviously strong person because they physically intimidate us. We may be afraid of a person because their skin tone is darker or lighter than ours or the fold of their eyes are different or they speak with an accent or believe in a different religion, their hair is different, and did you see what they are wearing!?

This “othering” mentality is not new. It was like this when Chinese first came to America. Of course, some came because of the gold rush but did you know that between 1863 and 1869 the Central Pacific Railroad hired more than 13,000 Chinese laborers to support the construction of the transcontinental railroad and shipped them here. Thousands of Chinese men were crammed into tight quarters, lacking fresh water, food, air and sunlight.

This deadly journey from Hong Kong took 75 to 100 days to reach California and a huge number died on the journey. Once here they were given the most difficult railroad work - at less pay. It took the construction crews, fifteen months to drill and blast through 1,659 feet of solid rock to complete the Summit Tunnel at Donner Pass in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Estimates of between 150 to 2000 died in doing so.

How did the United States reward the Chinese for building that railroad? Not one Chinese laborer was shown on the picture of the railway completion celebration.

In 1871 a riot broke out in LA's old Chinatown. The Los Angeles Chinese massacre of 1871 was a racial massacre targeting Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles. Approximately 500 "white" and Latino Americans attacked, harassed, robbed, and murdered nineteen ethnic Chinese residents, fifteen of whom were then also hanged by the mob. Yes, murdered and then hung! Those killed represented more than 10% of the small Chinese population of Los Angeles at the time,

That mob had gathered after hearing that a policeman and a rancher had been killed because of a conflict between rival tongs. News of their death spread across the city, fueling rumors were that the entire Chinese community were killing "whites" wholesale. Why do we blame everyone in an "other" group for the actions of one or a few?

Today's researchers describe that massacre as the largest mass lynching in American history. Ten men of the mob were prosecuted and eight were convicted of manslaughter. Then the convictions were overturned on appeal due to "technicalities".

How were the Chinese rewarded for building the railroad? The government passed the 1875 Page Act that forbid Chinese females from immigration. We don't want them breeding here. Then came the Chinese Exclusion act of 1882 forbidding any more Chinese men from immigrating and from becoming citizens. It

was the first and last US wholesale exclusion of any nationality in history.

How long were the Chinese and other Asians and Pacific Islanders excluded? In some form or another Chinese and most others were excluded from immigrating to the USA from 1875 to 1965 - 90 years. The passage of the Immigration and Nationalization Act ended it. You will read that the Chinese Exclusion Act ended in 1942 when China became America's ally during WW2, but immigration quotas were related to prior immigration and the Chinese had a very small quota.

How serious was this country about excluding the Chinese? Do a web search for "anti-Chinese posters" in the 1800's and early 1900's. One poster depicted the building of a wall against the rapists, thieves and murdering Chinese. The workers building that wall were mostly from ethnic groups who had also felt exclusion - an Italian, an Irishman, a Jew, an African American former slave, and a Union Soldier who had just fought to free the slaves all were helping Uncle Sam build that wall against the "Yellow Hoard" Chinese! Did they comply because as "low" as they were, at least they were not Chinese?

That same mental manipulation tactic is used today against the LGBTQ+ community when homophobes recruit "people of color" to join them. They essentially tell them (of course not in these words), "You may be low class but at least you're not "gay."

I have often wondered how strange it was that our United States would free the slaves in the South giving them rights, the promise of land and freedom and then import Chinese in the West to be paid minimum wage and be excluded from citizenship and further immigration.

Have you ever wondered what happened to those freed slaves? How would they survive economically and be assured safety after more than 200 years of slavery? What happened to that promised land that was given to them?

General William T. Sherman and Lincoln's Secretary of War Stanton met with 20 African American ministers. The ministers wanted land and the right to govern themselves. They spoke for themselves. "We want to live by ourselves, for there is a prejudice against us in the South that will take years to overcome."

Four days later, after the plan had been approved by President Lincoln 400,000 acres was confiscated from Confederate landowners and set aside as land to be owned and controlled by African American former slaves.

On Lincoln's orders, General Sherman issued Special Field Order No. 15 in January 1865. Imagine what 40 acres of land would have done for those African American families now landowners. The land was a strip of coastline stretching from South Carolina including Georgia's Sea Islands and 30 miles in from the coast, down to St. John's River a river that runs just north of Orlando Florida. It would be all be protected by the US Military.

Then the African American Baptist minister Ulysses L. Houston led 1,000 freed slaves to an island in Georgia where they established a self-governing community with Huston as the governor. By June of 1865, 40,000 freed former slaves settled on the 400,000 acres of what they called "Sherman Land" and began to work the land. General Sherman then added that the Army would lend them each a mule - hence the phrase "40 acres and a mule".

What happened to this visionary program that Lincoln had approved? Lincoln's successor Andrew Jackson, a Southern sympathizer, overturned the order and returned the land to those who had originally owned it - to the people who had declared and fought the war against the United States!

You may be wondering why I told you this African American story when we are at a memorial service for a Chinese American. First, we all need to make connections of empathy across perceived boundaries that are used to divide us. Second, this is the

week of June 19th when slavery finally ended. Third, today June 23, is a special day in Detroit's African American community. June 23, 1963, sixty-one years ago today Martin Luther King Jr. led the March to Freedom down Woodward Avenue Detroit, past Central United Methodist Church, where he had spoken many times. Approximately 125,000 people joined him in that historic march. That evening at Cobo Hall they first heard King's famous words - "I have a dream."

Detroiters continued to march for justice. After the abuse of protestors in Selma Monsignor Francis X. Canfield, led 400 students on a 4-mile march to Central Methodist Church on Woodward. There, they were joined by an additional 9,000 protestors, and the march proceeded to the Federal building.

On one of Dr. King's marches in Mississippi my brother Rev. Dr. J. Philip Park was proudly arrested.

Tragically, in 1968, just two weeks after Dr. King spoke again at Central Methodist Church, an assassin took Dr. King's life.

You can understand why Central is connected to the African American community and Dr. King. But what is the connection of Central Methodist Church Detroit to the Chinese community?

The first group of Chinese immigrants in Detroit lived near Grand Circus Park where Central Methodist Church is located. This was during the height of Chinese exclusion and heavy "racism". In 1915 Central's Deaconess Alice Shirley invited seven Chinese members to join Central's Sunday School. The Chinese continued to come even when in 1917, Detroit's Chinese Merchant Association, established its official Chinatown near the corner of Third and Porter Streets. That was still quite close to Central Church and the Chinese continued to walk to church. By 1922 more than 120 Chinese were attending church at Central, and a full Chinese Church was soon established there. That Chinese church remained at Central Methodist until 1962 - forty-seven years; even after the City of Detroit moved Chinatown further away to Cass Avenue and Peterboro.

Members of the Chinese community tell us Central Church helped their community thrive and grow in Detroit.

The Vincent Chin family was members of the Chinese church at Central. On Vincent's death, and at his mother Lily Chin's request Vincent's memorial service was held at Central. Those of us who attended that memorial service remember not just one minister but five ministers including our Methodist pastor David Kidd, a Catholic Priest, Jewish Rabbi, Muslim Imam and Buddhist Osho. It was a powerful multi-faith service and an attempt to lower the barriers between people and religions while promoting the concept that we are all an equal part of the continuum of humanity.

We are here remembering Vincent Chin, but few of us knew him personally. Instead of remembering the joy he brought to his family and friends, or the pride Lily Chin had in her son, or stories of the kind deeds he did, we are here remembering his abhorrent murder.

What should Vincent Chin's legacy be? Vincent was not a famous man, not a state or even local leader. But his awful murder thrust this Chinese American everyman into history. It has awakened in us a call to work for justice.

The act of "othering" that murdered Vincent still haunts us.

I cannot highlight the Chinese and African American struggles without also addressing the horrific "racial" assault by the US government on the indigenous people we call Native Americans.

In our Great Lakes region, they are called Anishinaabe or Nishnawbe Aski and the Nishnawbe Nation.

The war against the native people of this country must always be highlighted. We are standing on essentially stolen land. The acts against Native people were so atrocious that, as a nation, we want to ignore them, hide from what we did, and forget them. These assaults took the form of direct genocide, mass murder, forced displacement, ethnic cleansing, collective punishment, starvation and more. The famous Trail of Tears forced the

displacement of 60,000 people of the "Five Civilized Tribes" the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, and Seminoles and forcibly moved them from their ancestral homes to an "Indian Territory west of the Mississippi. Between 14,000 and 17,000 died along that "trail of tears".

By the close of the Indian Wars in the late 19th century, fewer than 238,000 Indigenous people remained of the estimated 5 million-plus living in North America before European contact.

I worked with the native people of Detroit and greatly miss my now departed Anishinaabe friends. In 1992, the 500th anniversary of Europeans coming to this land, my wife Mary and I organized a major exhibit of native art of the Great Lakes at Central's Swords into Plowshare Peace Center and Art Gallery. It was called "Anishinaabe Aski: Many Voices One Spirit". But much more needs to be done since our indigenous people continue to face major problems today.

In our country the daily news continues to remind us that we are surrounded by not just those who hate but by those who market hate. They seem to need it to support or gain positions of power. Their propaganda works to divide us.

This is happening not only here in this country but also internationally where too many continue our sad and long history of promoting "othering" for political purpose, and in the process also promotes hate, violence and even genocide.

Internationally, there are not just two armed conflicts but more than 110 armed conflicts in various forms taking place in the world today! The proponents, each in their own way, promote hate and violence by escalating fear and embracing the shadows of ignorance that hide us from the truth while they continue to promote the concept of "others".

We must work for justice not only for the tens of thousands of Asian Americans who have experienced hatred and violence but also for the equal number and more of African Americans, Native

Americans, Muslims, Palestinians, Jews, Ukrainians, Syrians the LGBTQ+ community, asylum seekers, women, and many others - all whom in one form or another and for one reason or another are under attack just for being “others” - for simply being who they are.

Will we continue to tolerate the concept of “othering”? Will we continue to look away when friends and family embrace those fears and multiply them based on the false fear that we must protect ourselves against those “others” when no differences of any worth exist? Will we continue to talk ourselves into ways of fearing rather than think ourselves into ways of caring and loving? Our minds sometimes seem numbed to the simple truth.

Vincent Chin was murdered because of his “race”. His “race”! Today nearly all of us humans, even progressives, function as though we accept the horrible findings of Samuel Morton the “father of scientific racism” who in the mid 1800’s not only “confirmed” that we are divided into colored “races” but that there is a hierarchy of intelligence related to those “races”.

Will we continue to reject today’s researchers who after studying thousands of samples of DNA tell that we are all members of the same race? Despite our appearances, we are all members of the same race! Therefore, we are all equal members of the continuum of humanity. We are all also simply tints and shades of the same color. Science has lifted the veil over our common and equal humanity. But will we, can we, accept that truth? Is truth too much?

After all, we are still rejoicing that the Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination based on race or color - when scientifically neither different ‘races’ nor different ‘colors’ exist in relation to humans. How will we resolve that dilemma?

Will we resolve it by ignoring it as a “not yet” issue thus continuing to support and even promote the concept of “racism” while not being “racists”? Yes, I know, for now we seem to have no choice, we must still work against “racism” as long as the myth

of “race” is the driving force behind so much hate. But I prefer being an “equal member of the continuum of humanity” far more than a member of the “yellow” race with its meaning. While yellow may mean “luck” in China it also means “yellow-bellied” coward here and we must remember and honor the Asian American Nisei who for their bravery in WW2 distinguished their battalion for being the most decorated heroes in Military History.

Racism is like a solid rock in our belief systems. Maybe if we individually chip away at it like the Chinese laborers did when they dug that railroad tunnel through solid rock we will eventually reveal the light.

As we have witnessed, with Vincent’s murder and attacks on, “others” every year since, the continuum of humanity is under attack - especially the concept that we are all an equal part of it.

We know that we will not be free until everyone is free, and we will not be equal until everyone is equal!

There are no “others” that are immune from these attacks. Women of all “races” including the so called “superior race” could not open a bank account without a male signature until the 1960’s and women could not take out a business loan until 1988. Roe vs Wade passed in 1973. Then more than 50 years later what we hoped was an unalienable and unalterable right was overturned by those marketing attacks on human rights and ultimately promoting hate. That battle has also taken many lives.

Asylum seekers yearn to be free but just like the attack ads used against Asians a hundred years ago. Walls - both physical and figurative - are being built using the same fear tactic words telling us that they are rapists, thieves, and murders to keep them out.

The religions of “other’s” are under attack, orchestrated by power seekers both here and abroad, and people are dying because of it.

No matter what our beliefs, we people of faith are all seeking to understand creation. Each of our various paths tell us we

should love one another. However, there are some who want to weaponize their religion and cram it into the very pores of our society thinking their path is superior. For example, as a Christian I am not against the 10 Commandments, but I am adamantly opposed to weaponizing it. Those who do so have no understanding of the concept of faith, the concept of morality or the concept of freedom of religion on which this country was founded.

Our lack of understanding has brought horrific abuse to the LGBTQ+ community. Members of this community have been with us from the beginning of recorded history and are present in every “racial” division, every ethnic group, and every religion. Here in particular deliberate ignorance seems to be the reason. Even people who are otherwise caring of others often seem to not want to know this community. They would rather accept ancient religious beliefs, formed thousands of years ago, than even try to understand today’s science.

We humans are all a part of the animal kingdom. Scientists have confirmed that at least 1500 animal species have members that exhibit homosexual behavior. These include insects, birds, fish, mammals, and all kinds of other species. As the often-viewed social media post says, “Homosexuality is found in 1500 species, homophobia is found in just one. Which one is unnatural?” We must be open to understand and support the fact that members of the LGBTQ+ community are natural parts of the continuum of humanity and like us all worthy of our love. Understanding and accepting truth should not weaken a religion. “The kingdom of God is not a gated community.”

A year ago, in a gentle rain, but slightly cooler temperature, I stood here at the grave of Vincent Chin remembering his murder.

Today, we are here again remembering that still tragic and awful injustice - 42 years ago.

Time itself cannot heal an injustice. In 42 years, we have not forgotten the injustice surrounding the murder of Vincent Chin.

I have tried to, show how Vincent Chin's injustice is deeply related to the injustices against many "others"- not only those that stem from the myth of "racial" differences but women, asylum seekers, religions, the LGBTQ+ community and many "others" that continue to be assaulted. I will never forget a person of power mocking the handicapped.

We all need to make connections of empathy and love across the invented boundaries that have been used to divide us. The assault on the continuum of humanity is clear and real.

Taking away the concept of different "races" will not end the assault on humanity but doing so will remove a powerful weapon.

The founders of this country had a dream, although not fully or clearly formed that we are ALL equal. Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream that his "four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character." We all share that dream.

Scientists tell us we are already equal, that we are already what we hope to be. Can we all share and work for the dream that one day each of us - all of humanity, will be considered an equal and valuable part of the continuum of humanity?

Can Vincent Chin's legacy be that we work to destroy the myth of "race" that killed him? Can we understand that race is not the only false fear dividing us?

Every religious leader on stage at Vincent's memorial 42 years ago believed that we should simply love one another. Can we all work to replace the shadowy veil of hate, with the light of truth, and the compassion of love? Can that be our dream?