Neighbors

By Michelle Chihara
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MY JAPANESE-AMERICAN grandfather's life's work was the Chihara Jewelry Company, a small rented storefront in Seattle, Washington. He sold earrings and watches and taught himself how to repair televisions. He was jailed when American went to war with Japan because he was a "community leader." He was reunited with my grandmother, and their four children, after a year and a half of jail time, in internment camp in

Minidoka, Idaho. In his FBI file, I have a copy of a letter written by his neighbor, Fred Bergman. It appears on custom Bergman Luggage stationery, with a drawing of leather valises running down the side. Bergman wrote to the War Relocation Authority, an organization called into being by a stroke of President Roosevelt's pen with Executive Order 9066. Bergman said of my grandfather: "He has always met his business obligations. His wife helped him operate his business. As far as my knowledge goes, I can state that from my observations of him, he has never given me reason to doubt his adherence to Americanization, nor to the laws and customs of our country."

Bergman was my Japanese-American's family's white neighbor, and therefore a character reference. Note the soft double negative: "never given me reason to doubt."

My white evangelical Christian neighbors, here in Los Angeles, just moved away. They were a household of six, two grandparents, two parents and two kids, in a small rented house in Silver Lake. Their little girl has been my daughter's best friend for years. I won't use their real names here, as I did not ask their permission to share their story, but I imagine they might read this and recognize themselves. They were frustrated and facing financial difficulties. They were leaning towards voting for Trump. They relocated to a cheaper California town where they have family, in the middle of a school year, right before the election. On the day they left, I walked our daughters down the block for a last trip to our local 99 Cent store and bought them the special matching stuffed green puppy dogs they wanted. My family stood there on the sidewalk, brushing away tears and waving, when they finally pulled away. They were unable to capture their very shy, almost feral cat, Bella. We have been feeding her on their porch. At night, we hear her mewling in the hedge.

The grandmother, I'll call her Catherine, was the entrepreneur and owner of my neighbors' family-operated business. They were in the fashion and design industry. All of them had a sharp eye for outfits. Once, on their porch, Catherine complimented my shoes and then asked me "where I was from." I identified the origins of my last name, and she asked me about the internment. She volunteered a story about the Japanese-American farmers next to her own family's ranch during the war. She told me her family had tended their farm for them. She said when their neighbors were taken away, her family tilled their land and harvested their crops. She said they gave the farm back to them when the war ended.

Almost all the Japanese Americans who were interned lost everything — farms, boats, homes, savings, dignity, pride. My grandfather came to this country at age fourteen, with an eighth grade education. He was converted to Catholicism by Maryknoll priests. Like most Japanese immigrants, he staked everything on the American promise. When the internment happened, most Japanese Americans like my grandfather lost everything. They had white neighbors who had known them for years and knew what their farms and houses were worth. They streamed by in humiliating yard sales and offered $5 for a piano, $500 for a house. Farm inventory, store location, years of building up a customer base. It all went for pennies on the dollar. When push came to shove, most white neighbors said nothing more than "he was reliable in business operations." Having someone keep the farm afloat and then give it back at the end of the war would have been a life-altering godsend, an act of Christian charity unrivaled by almost every white neighbor of Japanese Americans on the West Coast. My neighbor was born just after the war, she would not have been around for her family's heroic act. But I was moved to tears when she told me. I wanted to believe. I still want to believe it was true. She certainly wanted it to be true.

Later, this same neighbor sat at my kitchen table over dinner and told my family she was thinking of voting for Trump. I wanted, in that moment, to remind her about the Japanese neighbors and their farm. But then, as now, I felt shut down by the weight of history. For a moment my memory warped and faltered. Maybe she had meant something else. Maybe I had heard her wrong.

My neighbors and I had so much in common. We want the same things for our children. When we sat around my kitchen table before they left, I felt I both did and did not understand them. They were frustrated with Los Angeles, and possible angry that their deep roots in California had not been enough to keep them here. Their business was successful, but not enough to buy the too-small house next to mine. Their house is owned by a Japanese-American nurse, a woman whose family moved to Silver Lake in the boom times after the war, after white neighbors in Pasadena told her they were not welcome over there. Catherine and her family had previously owned a house on the West side, but it went into foreclosure. Catherine's husband lost a good job with a major American software company a while ago, and now spends a lot of time sitting in his car while it's parked on the street, listening to talk radio.

I knew she was frustrated, and I listened to her. I did not bring up her story of helping the Japanese farmers. I wanted to have a peaceful dinner. I wanted to keep believing the story.

When my grandparents were released from Minidoka, they were able to go back to The Chihara Jewelry Company. The landlord had boarded up the store, my grandfather's life's work, and left it there, the entire inventory, for six years. Everything was dusty and old. They had to live in the store for a bit, but it was a place to start. That meant the world to my family. My uncle says that the landlord who helped us had an eye on

events in Europe, and that he was Jewish. My grandfather sent all of his kids to college. My father later married my mother, a Brooklyn Jew. They were an interracial marriage in California when that was still illegal in many states. I later married a man whose Jewish father was quite literally on the last boat out of Europe, we have a newspaper article about it with a grainy, black-and-white photo of him. My husband now works for the Southern California ACLU, the only organization that stood up for the Japanese Americans in 1945. I'm well aware of America's long and bloody history of racial violence, but I have also always lived with the knowledge that my family's very existence is a living testament to times when some of America chose a better way.

I'm an academic now, and my family will be, possibly along with my neighbors, among those "coastal elite" who will fight a Muslim registry or mass deportations. At the ACLU, in our friend group, among my wonderful diverse students at a small liberal arts college, we have Muslim friends and friends on DACA, people who are undocumented and in danger. I want to do more than write a mild note stating that my friends and neighbors are reliable in business operations. I want to do more than till the land. Because when will the war on "terror" end? And when will the people deported get to come home?

If Catherine's family gave their neighbors' farm back, I wonder if any of the neighbors are still Japanese? Catherine is moving back to her family's farm, but she never mentioned current Japanese neighbors. The question I really wanted to ask her that night was: if your heart was with those Japanese farmers, if your family did all that work for them then, how can you not see the same drumbeat of resentment and rage today?

Was I listening in the wrong way? Was the story about the Japanese

neighbors meant only to placate me, or even to indicate that the internment was a good outcome? Was she saying: see, the Japanese left quietly, we did a little extra farming, and America won! It was President Ronald Reagan who paid reparations recognizing that the internment was wrong. As one attorney in California put it in 1942, it was the Associated Farmers and "newspapers notorious as spokesmen for reactionary interests" who clamored for "elimination of the Japanese competition." Even Reagan could see that internment was the product of class-based racial resentment. And for many Japanese Americans, reparations meant the issue had been laid to rest, and we should not speak out about it anymore. Our community has not always been a vocal ally of other minority groups. But Japanese-American groups did speak up against the Muslim registry after 9/11, and now, a Trump surrogate from the Make America Great Again PAC has already brought the Japanese internment up as a precedent for what "has been done," for what could be done again.

Am I being unfair? Administrators at my college have warned the faculty by email that "Trump supporters are the new minority on campus." Some Trump supporters feel harassed and intimidated. The administration warned those of us, like me, who have talked openly about the President-elect in class to respect and make space for all opinions. I have made space in my classes, among groups of students in tears. Some students have voiced concerns about protesters burning flags or punching Trump effigies. I have listened to them, as they blame people of color and queers and women for "bringing too much negativity" to campus. But I don't know how to make equal space for different opinions about the Klan marching openly in North Carolina.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, in response to a populist drumbeat that had its roots in rural, white, class-based

resentment and fear which became focused on a minority group. For some white farmers and coastal residents, the Japanese internment was a very real financial boost. In the face of that, some Japanese Americans turned in anger on the neighbors and the nation who had betrayed them. The Japanese Americans who resisted and fought the state were punished. Some were deported to a Japan they had never seen. Others tried to prove their loyalty to the state. Thousands of Japanese-American citizens volunteered for military service from the camps. The 442nd Regimental Combat Team was one of the most decorated units of all time, with 9,486 Purple Hearts. Some say they were used as cannon fodder, in defense of white units.

I live a privileged life partly because the sacrifices my immigrant grandparents made paid off. I don't know that I'll be strong enough to keep faith with this country if they imprison my husband and my entire community and take away my life's savings and my home, and I don't want to find out. But when my grandfather chose the path of quiet re-dedication, he instilled in my father, and in me, a legacy of dedication to this country's better version of itself. My father believed in America's decision to fight fascism and in FDR's over-arching vision of the States. My Japanese-American family sucked it up and put their heads down and went back to work because they believed that our version of America would be there for them to go home to when the war was over.

How should I have better listened to my angry and frustrated neighbors? We were sad when they drove away. I did not share their church's values, but in the end, their Christianity brought them closer to me. Catherine's son and his wife were devout evangelicals, and they shared their God with a close black friend who was like an uncle to their children. They were more turned off by Trump's racism than Catherine was. Catherine's son and his wife told us they would not vote for Trump.

Catherine would only say she thought it was a hard choice. Demographically, a threatened businesswoman from a white farming family, and her husband, an older white man listening to talk radio alone in his car — demographically they went for Trump.

Whatever their votes and whatever they did or didn't do for the Japanese, my older white neighbors were the ones who best remembered postwar America and the promise it once held. They also seemed least able to see history repeating itself. I don't know that trying to talk to Catherine that night about her family's Japanese-American neighbors would have changed her mind. But I believe now that I should have tried, with empathy and respect. This is my effort to speak with her now, across the transom. We broke bread together. We respect each other. We are looking after their abandoned cat. I know that my neighbors are reliable people who care about the laws and customs of this country. As such, I beg them now to see that bland statements of tolerance were not enough in 1942 because they are never enough. Class and race in America have always been intertwined. There is no understanding what happened to the Issei farmers without understanding the class dynamics, nor is there a path towards a shared future in America without addressing the racism woven into the rage and resentment now stalking the halls of the White House. I hope my neighbors will always remember how much our families have in common — especially when people like me come around, once again, to ask if they will till the farm, do the work, stand with us. My grandfather's America is a dream that never existed. But I haven't given up on my neighbors.

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