

Raise Your Voice Let it Out! Workshop

for NJTC 2008 / by Ivan Wei

Introduction

Just because we can't see social problems doesn't mean they don't exist. One of the unfortunate consequences of living a middle class lifestyle is that most of us are sheltered from seeing the struggles for survival taking place all around us, except when we watch TV and YouTube clips where these struggles seem more like entertainment than amazing, real-life and real-time events happening to real people living not very far away from us.

Just this past Thursday night I sat in a church in Newark, listening to Black American students and educators speak about the enormous difficulties Black students face with getting high school educations - in New York and New Jersey. Will you all take a moment to think about that with me?

Today. In America. In the area around the greatest city in the world, thousands of Black students are having serious trouble getting high school educations. [pause] The educators in the panel blamed this on failures in our educational system, and in the way Black students are regarded in our society. Parents, students and educators got up to say, "We have to stop criminalizing our young men," "We have to believe in them," "We have to reach out to kids and give them a helping hand. Those kids really want to do the right thing, they just don't know how."

While you're letting those thoughts sink in, let's look at something else. In Tibet, the Chinese government has for several decades been practicing what the Dalai Lama recently called, "cultural genocide." For many years, China has been teaching its students that the Tibetan people live miserable, backwards existences and they need the help of citizens that the Chinese government sends to Tibet in order to make Tibet "a better place to live." Those people are paid by the Chinese government to resettle Tibetan lands and replace traditional Tibetan customs with Chinese traditions. One Chinese student describes his attitude towards the Tibetans in this way, "First, I will use my friendship to help [the Tibetans]. But if they refuse my friendship, I will use war to develop them, like the Americans did with the Indians."

People, I'm asking you to turn your thoughts to what we can do to celebrate the ways we are each different from the person sitting next to us. These differences represent our uniqueness, our parents' traditions and our cultures. These are the problems that we as young people have been handed and they are problems that have to be solved by our generation.

So, take a deep breath, clear your mind, set your intent to be a powerful advocate for truth and justice during the next hour. OK, now it's time to get started.

Raise Your Voice Let it Out! Workshop Conclusion

First I want to thank each of you for choosing this workshop and for coming together in the past hour as a team to find ways we can celebrate culture and protect important traditions and individual uniqueness. In America, no modern speech on racial sensitivity would be entirely complete without quoting a few words from the great Dr. Martin Luther King, Junior. Here are some words he spoke a few years ago:

. . . One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. . . .

When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

I have a dream that my 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.

I have a dream today!

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of "interposition" and "nullification" -- one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

And this will be the day -- this will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning:

My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing.

Land where my fathers died, land of the Pilgrim's pride,

From every mountainside, let freedom ring!

And if America is to be a great nation, this must become true.