“Insights from *Crying in H Mart* and *Stay True”*

Worship Service for

The Unitarian Universalist Church of Tippecanoe County

West Lafayette, Indiana

October 29, 2023 – 10:30 a.m.

The Rev. Jennie Barrington, Settled Minister

Pianist: Richard Maddux; Special Musicians: Spontaneous Hopeful Monster

Worship Associate: Janice Thiel

Producer: Noemi Ybarra; Sound Technician: Larry Guentert

**Opening Words** by Martin Guevara Urbina

“Perhaps more than ever, in a highly globalized world, we must recognize that multiculturalism is not simply understanding ethnic/racial histories nor the mere appreciation of cultural ‘difference,’ but accepting that multiculturalism spreads across the very inner core of America’s institutions, and has become ingrained in the very essence of life, for multicultural perspectives, ideas, and ideologies empower us to elevate the multicultural discourse to a higher level of social transformation—ultimately, universal equality, justice, respect, and human dignity for all, in all facets of human existence.”

**Chalice Lighting Words** by Adam Slate

We gather this morning as one community  
A community united by common ideals:  
Love, justice, diversity, freedom, mutual care, equity.  
Yet look around.  
Look at the faces of those around you.  
Each face represents an individual  
Every one of us with our own story, needs, strengths, and faults.  
We light our chalice today honoring our common connection  
And also the uniqueness that lives within each of us.

**Our Covenant**

Love is the Spirit of this Church,

And Service is its Law. This is our Covenant:

To Dwell Together in Peace,

To Seek the Truth in Love,

And to Help One Another.

**Opening Hymn** #97 Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child

**Spoken Blessing and Moment of Silence [from, *Gates of Repentance,* a prayerbook of services, readings, meditations and songs for Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur]**

“O Source of peace, lead us to peace, a peace profound and true; lead us to a healing, to mastery of all that drives us to war within ourselves and with others. May our deeds inscribe us in the Book of Life and Blessings, Righteousness, and peace! O Source of peace, bless us with peace.”

**Special Video: Michelle Zauner’s “Brief but Spectacular,” from PBS Newshour** <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/brief/446926/michelle-zauner>

**Reading “Asian American Joy,” by Yuri Yamamoto** [Rev. Jennie]

My second daughter got married in April. I had never been in such a place filled with Asian Americans. My husband and I are from Japan, and the groom’s parents are from Taiwan. Most family members and their partners looked East Asian, and so did most of the couple’s friends. There were also quite a few South Asians. Black and white people were few and far between. Almost everyone was speaking “perfect English.”

As we were eating, drinking, dancing to American songs, photo-boothing, singing, laughing and talking, I soaked up the Asian American energy. It was distinctly American, yet distinctly Asian. The couple included a Chinese tea ceremony in the wedding to honor their Asian heritages. It was unfamiliar to me, but my heart was warmed while the groom poured tea for my husband and me. There was sushi and Chinese food at the reception, and their Indian friends presented a Bhangra dance, which the couple joined in! I felt comfortable, unlike in my usual spaces that are dominated by whiteness.

Then it dawned on me that such a space probably existed only in this country. I grew up in Japan surrounded by Japanese people. I have been to Chinatowns in the U.S. and Canada. But this was much more inclusive and multicultural.

Immigrants come to this country with our own languages, cultures, national and ethnic prides, histories, and views of each other. I hardly knew anyone but Japanese in Japan and was ashamed of the atrocities my people had committed in various parts of Asia. For a long time, I tiptoed around other Asians because of my shame. Yet I did not socialize with Japanese people, either, because they reminded me of things I did not like in Japan.

I also struggled to find my place in the black-and-white dichotomy of race relations in the American South. In the meantime, my children had to figure out their place on their own while being exposed to daily Othering in school. By the time they were in high school, they were mostly hanging out with Asian American friends.

As I was dancing and laughing, I could feel why they chose to claim their Asian American identity. It felt great not having to constantly explain who I was, apologize for my Japanese-ness, or cater to the needs of white people. Each of us at the wedding had unique stories about their life, but most knew how it felt to be an Asian American in this country. That was enough for me.

I wonder if the day will come when someone who looks like me—in any part of this country—might feel as liberated as I was on that day. It would take a lot of hard work on the part of the dominant culture to decenter whiteness. Meanwhile, we on the margins continue to assert our places in this country.

**Sermon** “Insights from *Crying in H Mart* and *Stay True”*  [Rev. Jennie]

Some of you may wonder what my current interest in Asian American heritage is based in. The answer is that a few months ago I was watching the National Book Critics Circle awards on C-SPAN. And the winner in the autobiography category was this beautiful memoir called, “Stay True,” by Taiwanese American writer, Hua Hsu. His memoir begins in the 1990s when he was a teenage and young adult at University of California Berkeley. He was immersing himself in alternative and fringe culture, especially discovering new music and promoting it until it became mainstream. He created and produced a “Zine,” and was attracted to political resistance movements. His book honors and memorializes his close friend Ken, who was also Asian American. But Ken was of Japanese American descent, his family had been in the United States for generations, and he assimilated to the predominate culture. Initially, Hua Hsu found Ken to be so mainstream in so many ways that he just didn’t like him. Yet Ken was a true people-person, gracious, generous, attentive, demonstrative. And they formed a close friendship forged over smoke breaks, shopping at record stores and consignment stores, and long rides along the coast listening to mix tapes of their favorite music discoveries with friends. *Stay True* is the true story of a platonic friendship between two young men who each changed each other for the better. It is their differences, and the fact that they talked so frankly about their differences, that made their relationship so rich. Hua Hsu and Ken only knew each other for less than three years. Then Ken was killed in an act of senseless violence, a carjacking. Hua Hsu began making notes in a journal and collecting memorabilia about his friendship with Ken. Now, twenty-five years later, this book is profoundly helpful to people trying to make sense of the loss of a love-one.

So after watching the National Book Critics Circle awards, I went to Barnes and Noble, in search of, *Stay True.* I talked with a staff member there, a young woman who is white. I described the book to her and why I felt so moved to read it. I said that I felt that when anyone uses the label, “Asian American,” that actually includes so many different kinds of people, all of whom are unique, each of whom has their distinct life story to tell. We need to lift up and learn about all of those unique individual people. She said that we would find the book in the store. But she then said that what I had described made her think of a book that she had recently read that was so moving to her. It made her cry, she said, but she really loved it. It’s called, *Crying in H Mart,* by Michelle Zauner. She said that Michelle Zauner is a young adult of Korean descent. And when her mother began dying of cancer, at far too young an age, Michelle Zauner reconnected with her mother and with her Korean heritage through shopping for the ingredients for, cooking, and sharing Korean food. This was so helpful to me because it broadened out the life stories I learned about for this sermon. Like *Stay True,* *Crying in H Mart* is beautifully written and unsparingly honest. From her moving memoir, I now know Michelle Zauner to be so courageous, strong, resourceful, and devoted. When Michelle Zauner loves someone, she is all in. When her mother told her of her terminal cancer, Michelle dropped everything and went from Philadelphia to Oregon to care for her. There was no one else to do so; she is an only child and is estranged from her father. Michelle had not been in regular communication with her mother in the years before. This was largely due to Michelle’s sense of calling to play guitar, sing, and write songs, a vocation that her mother did not approve of. Michelle felt that she had not been a good daughter. But when her mother began dying, Michelle seized the opportunity to return to her mother the love and care Michelle had received from her. One of the best examples of this is that Michelle was partnered with a man named Peter Bradley. Michelle asked him, if he imagined marrying her in the next few years, then let’s get married now, while her mother was still alive. Happily, Peter agreed. Michelle let her mother make the decisions about the wedding and reception and all that that celebration involved. And it did take place in time for her mother to take part, along with abundant family and friends. And Michelle formed an indie pop band called, “Japanese Breakfast,” which has become a popular commercial success.

Both Hua Hsu and Michelle Zauner suffered the loss of a loved one when they were far too young to process those tragic deaths. Thus they each felt compelled to write, in response to those experience. And through the writing process, they were gradually able to make some sense and find some meaning and something of a roadmap for moving forward with their lives. What Michelle Zauner first wrote was songs, and then an essay which would become her memoir. The first line of it is, “Ever since my mom died, I cry in H Mart.” Hua Hsu bought a journal. It has a dark blue fabric cover, with a dragon embroidered in gold. What he scrawled with a Sharpie across the first page was, “Everything is wrong.” We can feel how helpful those two sentences are to people who are processing a senseless death.

Both Hua Hsu and Michelle Zauner write of their many trips with their parents back to their native countries, Hua Hsu to Taiwan and Michelle to South Korea, especially to Seoul, where she was born. There, each of them were able to feel they were in a cultural majority in ways they seldom felt in the United States. Michelle writes of how, as a young girl visiting South Korea, people kept remarking that she was so lovely. “I was pretty in Seoul,” she writes. Whereas in grade school in Oregon, classmates would ask her, “Are you Chinese?” [No.] “Are you Japanese then?” No, she would answer. And she was left feeling like there wouldn’t be any point in trying to explain that she was Korean, that her classmates there wouldn’t have a way of understanding what that meant. And Hua Hsu wrote,

“To me, Asian American was a messy, arbitrary category, but one that was produced by a collective struggle. It was a category capacious enough for all of our hopes and energies. There were similarities that cut across nationality and class; the uncommunicative parents, the cultural significance of food, the fact that we all took our shoes off at home.” [p.91] He goes on to write, about an Asian American’s relationship to language: “A simple pronoun of ‘I’ or ‘we,’ a first-person perspective, all of it seemed mysterious. We could never write in a way that assumed anyone knew where we were coming from. Neither Black nor white, just boring to everyone on the outside. Where do you even begin explaining yourself?” [p. 187]

The label, “Asian American” can encompass heritages from so many countries, including Bangladeshi, Burmese, Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Hmong, Indian, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Laotian, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Taiwanese, and Vietnamese. From reading these two memoirs, I feel honored and enriched to now know the life stories of these two young adults behind that label of Asian American. Michelle Zauner and Hua Hsu enriched themselves by learning about their ethnic heritage. Their main connection to that heritage was their parents and other family members. The lives of those extended family members are a legacy that can be a gift to us. Having both lost loved-ones whose lives were cut short far too early, both memoirists made certain choices such that parts of their lives were an homage to the loved-ones they lost. And having published literary works, we all can now know the goodness at the heart of Michelle’s mother, Chongmi, and Hua Hsu’s friend, Ken. Michelle wrote:

“Her art was the love that beat on in her loved ones, a contribution to the world that could be just as monumental as a song or a book. There could not be one without the other. Maybe I was just terrified that I might be the closest thing she had to leaving a piece of herself behind.”

And Hua Hsu writes of stopping by the Nordstrom where Ken worked in the children’s shoe department, and anonymously watching him interact with a young family:

“I was standing at an angle where I could see Ken coming out from the storeroom in the back, carefully tying a balloon around his finger. When he finished, he looked at the loop, then at the balloon, just above his head, safely anchored to his finger, and smiled a goofy smile. He reappeared at the counter and handed it to the little boy waiting with his parents, and the child smiled an even goofier smile. Then Ken looked up, saw me, and smiled again.

[He goes on to write] When you’re young, you do so many things hoping to be noticed. The way you dress or stand, the music played loud enough to catch the attention of another person who might know a song, too. And then there are things you do as you step out into the world, the real world full of strange adults, testing out what it means to be generous or thoughtful. In that instant, before every memory was placed along some narrative arc, before the act of remembering took on a desperate air, I simply felt lucky to witness something so effortlessly kind-- to see my friend do something that was good.” [p. 181]

When anyone uses the label, “Asian American,” that actually includes so many different kinds of people, all of whom are unique, each of whom has their distinct life story to tell. We need to listen to and learn about those unique individual people, such that they do not experience “othering,” but instead are embraced for the heritages and life choices that are enriching America every day. I’ll close with these words of Michelle Zauner:

“I wonder how many people at H Mart miss their families. How many are thinking of them as they bring their trays back from the different stalls. If they’re eating to feel connected, to celebrate these people through food. Which ones weren’t able to fly back home this year, or for the past ten years? Which ones are like me, missing the people who are gone from their lives forever?”

**Closing Hymn** #159 This is My Song

**Chalice Extinguishing** by Beth Graham [Janice Thiel]

What we try to express as Unitarian Universalists, are these truths:

* Each of us is unique.
* Each of us has gifts we were given at birth – we were born with these gifts; they are wired within us.
* Each of us has the responsibility to apply these talents to the world.
* Each of us must navigate how to find our place in creation’s fold, while understanding that everyone around us is involved in the very same pursuit.

**Benediction** by Yuri Yamamoto [Rev. Jennie]

“Eternal love, give us courage and strength to carry out this hard, messy work of multiculturalism so that we may expand the circle of love and solidarity beyond our family, friends, tribe, nationality and race.”