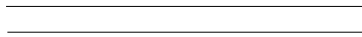




2

UNDERSTANDING OUR ASIAN DNA



Along with owning our sovereign foundations, like I had to with my birth mother, I see two other essential components for Asian American leaders as we develop our spiritual lives. First, believe God made no mistakes when he made us. Second, have an awareness of our unique “Asian DNA,” which can both undercut and enhance our spiritual development.



GOD DOESN'T MAKE MISTAKES

David affirms in Psalm 139 how God had his creative hand upon him. Can we also say the same for ourselves? What questions does this text raise for us? Here are a few of mine from over the years, with some personal reflections.

For it was you who formed my inward parts.

“Lord, did you mean for my eyes to be so slanted, narrow and brown, not blue? My nose so flat? My hair jet black and so straight? Speaking of hair, couldn't you have put just a little on my chest? And another foot in height sure would have helped my chances for the NBA.”

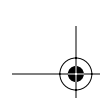
You knit me together in my mother's womb.

“Knitting is painstakingly slow. Every stitch is deliberate and the color of each skein critical. Were you that careful when you formed me?”

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.

“Wonderfully, Lord? Michael Jordan, maybe. Catherine Zeta-Jones,





perhaps. Paul Tokunaga? Me, a wonder?"

*Wonderful are your works;
that I know very well.*

"Okay, okay, you made your point."

*My frame was not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.*

"Intricately woven! There you go with that knitting thing again. God, could it actually be that of all the centuries for me to be born in, you chose the twentieth? Of all nationalities I could have been, you chose Japanese? Of all possible mothers I could have had you chose Miyo Kumagai Tokunaga for me? Of all places, Marysville, California?"

Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.

"Before I was a thought in Katsumi and Miyo's minds, you had been thinking about me. Not just thinking of me, you looked at me. Before my fingers became fingers and elbows became elbows, you were checking me out, eager to create another masterpiece."

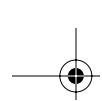
*In your book were written
all the days that were formed for me,
when none of them as yet existed.*

"September 3, 1951; March 28, 1953; September 11, 1954; December 25, 1968; August 27, 1977; December 26, 1983—there they were, in your own handwriting! You weren't surprised when I was born, when Mom was killed, when Dad remarried, when I accepted Christ, when Margaret and I married, when Sam was born. You knew, didn't you, all the time?"

How do you read Psalm 139:13-16? Do you sometimes feel like a mistake? Do you wonder if God's hard drive locked up when your name was coming up? Or do you believe you are one of God's wonderful works? Do you *feel* fearfully and wonderfully made?

These are critical questions to answer. How we answer them helps us





decide whether we can fully give the rest of our lives to God. Is the God of our tomorrow also the God of our yesterday?

For me, personalizing Psalm 139 means asking myself pointed questions: Did God have a purpose in making me Japanese American? Did God have a reason for putting me in family of Katsumi and Miyo Tokunaga? Was he in control or on lunch break when twenty-six of my relatives—parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins—were put in internment camps during World War II? Did God make a giant computer error when he put me in a family that was Buddhist for generations?

Then there's the hardest question of all: Did God have a plan for my good when my mother was killed in that head-on collision, leaving my sister and me without an incredibly nurturing mother and my father without the love of his life?

All the days ordained for me were written in the book before one of them came to be.

“Even March 28, 1953, Lord, on that two-lane road outside of Marysville, California?”

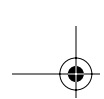
How we read and understand Psalm 139:13-16 also directly impacts our spiritual lives. If the God of the universe takes that much interest in me, I must be incredibly important and valuable to him. I'm not just one of millions. For God, I'm one of one, a masterpiece, wonderfully made. Knowing and believing that, I can lead with God-inspired confidence. I don't have to lead others exactly like my leaders led me. How I lead will be unique because I am unique.

My son Sam had a great T-shirt and even had the audacity to wear it as a young teenager. On the front side: “Never before, never again.” On the back: “I am a legend in the making!” Rarely has such solid theology made it onto a T-shirt. It's so true: never will there be one quite like each of us. Here's another great T-shirt idea, right from question one of the *Children's Catechism*.

On the front: “Who made you?”

On the back: “God.”





ASIAN DNA

Old paint on canvas, as it ages, sometimes becomes transparent. When that happens, it is possible, in some pictures, to see the original lines: a tree will show through a woman's dress, a child makes way for a dog, a large boat is no longer on an open sea.¹

Lillian Hellman wasn't thinking of Asian Americans when she wrote these opening lines in *Pentimento* but her imagery works. We see, in fact, we are the picture on top—a woman's dress, a child, a boat. Underneath are the nearly visible images that get clearer the longer and harder one stares. These are the forces that shape and mold us. Sometimes they aid us on our spiritual journey, other times they cut us off at the knees.

Another component of our spiritual development involves recognizing the main brushstrokes already on our canvas as an Asian American. This is our Asian deoxyribonucleic acid, the genetic material within us.

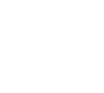
While they don't predetermine who we are or what we will become, our fingerprints as Asian Americans carry enough similar DNA molecules with the same sense strands that patterns emerge. To not acknowledge their place in our life and come to terms with how they impact our spiritual life would be to rob ourselves of going deeper with God.

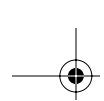
I use the term DNA here more descriptively than scientifically. When I refer to our "Asian DNA," I mean those traits or qualities that seem to persist and be present in us as Asian Americans. For most Asian nationalities, especially those rooted in East Asia, five sense strands—Confucianism, shame, suffering, our families and liminality—stand out to me.

CONFUCIANISM

Koreans, Chinese and Japanese are Confucian-based people. The teachings of Confucius form the warp and woof of these cultures. While his imprint is also on Southeast and South Asian nationalities (such as Filipino, Cambodian, Vietnamese, Indian and Pakistani), they are not as steeped in and influenced by Confucianism as those with East Asian heritage.

For most Asian Americans, Confucianism is not a religion or even a philosophy to which we would intentionally devote ourselves. Rarely would we say "I'm a follower of Confucius" in the same way one might





say “I follow Jesus.” I’ve yet to see a “Confucius Loves Me” T-shirt. Rather, it permeates our social and family structures, much in the way Americans do not recite the Declaration of Independence but certainly have the values of the Declaration woven into the fabric of our society.

Confucius (K’ung Ch’iu or K’ung Fu-Tzu) was a teacher and philosopher, then later a government official, who lived in what is now the Shantung province of China during the latter part of the Zhou (or Chou) Dynasty from 551 to 479 B.C.

Vice and corruption were rampant and Confucius used his position as minister of crime to bring remarkable reform. He felt strongly that rulers could be great only if their own lives were above reproach and guided by moral principles. He never claimed deity for himself and had little belief in the supernatural.

Confucius’s *Lunyu* or *Analects*, considered to be the most reliable source of information about his life and teachings, were practical and ethical rather than religious. Confucius held that proper outward acts based on the five virtues of kindness, uprightness, decorum, wisdom and faithfulness constitute the whole of human duty. Reverence for parents, living and dead, was one of his key concepts.



Li



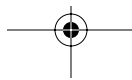
Jen

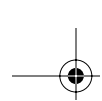
The tenets of Confucianism center around the concepts of *jen* and *li*. Jen is a combination of the characters for “human being” and for “two”; thus empathetic humanity should be at the foundation for human relations. Li is a combination of morality and etiquette, custom and ritual.

Li is a combination of morality and etiquette, custom and ritual.

At the core of Confucian ethics is *ren*, variously translated as “love,” “goodness,” “humanity” and “human-heartedness.” Also at the heart of his teaching was that successful individual human relations form the basis of society. To bring order to society, one must first bring order to the family, which will ultimately bring order to the community, which will then bring order to the government.

Some other strong values of Confucianism include parental authority





and honor (known as “filial piety”: children must honor and obey parents, putting their comfort, interest and wishes above their own), social hierarchy, male dominance, duty and obligation, and education.

Some aspects of Confucian thought are quite compatible with Christianity.

- Like Confucianism, the Bible calls us to honor our parents (Lev 19:2-3; Deut 5:16; Prov 6:20-23; Eph 6:1).
- Like Confucianism, we are to put the desires of others above our own (Phil 2:3-4; 1 Cor 10:24).
- Like Confucianism, Christianity recognizes that when primary relationships are made right, the larger society is bettered (Mt 5:11-16).

But some aspects of Confucian thought clash with Christian faith. Some of it may be because of differing missions, some of it because of differing ideology. Confucianism can undermine spiritual development in at least three areas.

First, *Confucian ideology of women distorts the spiritual lives of both Asian American women and men*. In *Korean American Ministry*, In Sook Lee writes:

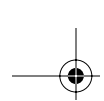
That [Korean] culture has consistently considered women inferior to men. Korean women were required to obey their fathers before marriage, their husbands after marriage, and their sons in old age. They early learned to be quiet, submissive, and obedient under all circumstances. Most of these restrictions were rooted in a Korean type of Confucian philosophy.²

Lee continues, “Confucian ideology relegated women to an inferior position and its leaders expended great effort to indoctrinate both sexes into supporting this social order.”³

In *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People*, Helen Zia says, “Growing up female, I could see the Confucian order of the Three Obediences in action: the daughter obeys the father, the wife obeys the husband, and, eventually, the widow obeys the son. The Confucian tradition was obviously stacked against me, as a girl.”⁴

Jesus would have taken Confucius to the woodshed over how he viewed women’s place in their families. When his travels took him to the village of Bethany, a suburb of Jerusalem, Luke in his Gospel doesn’t tell us, “Jesus





called on Lazarus, who by the way, had two sisters, whose names, by the way, were Mary and what's her name? . . . uh, Martha, I think."

Rather, he emphasizes whose home it was: "As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him" (Lk 10:38). Likewise, John levels the relational playing field: "Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus" (Jn 11:5).

When a belief system is deeply woven into the fabric of a culture, it affects all relationships. How can Asian American women approach God believing he wants the best for them when their own culture tells them that's not possible? How can we expect Asian American women to be fully functioning in the body of Christ—including exercising leadership gifts—if a still small voice keeps whispering, "What you have to offer is not as good as what a brother can bring"?

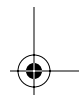
Frankly, I don't think it is women's sole responsibility to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps so they can be on equal footing with men. Asian American men, if not in this generation then in generations past, have perpetuated this inequality. Men must take responsibility for correcting our and our forefathers' wrongdoing.

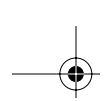
As Asian American men we need to speak up on behalf of women in general and for specific women who are qualified to do certain tasks or fill specific roles. We need to be proactive and affirm, train and mentor the enormously gifted sisters in our midst. Woe to us and the body of Christ if men stay silent, thus assenting that we are better suited to follow Jesus and help his kingdom grow than are women.

As Asian American men we must also realize that such a distorted view of women hurts us. We, perhaps subconsciously, think we are better and deserve better. When we do that, we lose out on authentic partnership with women.

Second, *Confucius's extremely high view of education can undermine our desire to give Christ the preeminence in all we do.* Jung Young Lee writes in *Korean Preaching*:

Education remains important to the Korean people. Americans often do not understand why Koreans are almost fanatical about education. Most Koreans want to attend the best schools and to attain the highest academic





degrees. Whenever they meet new people, they almost always ask: “What school did you go to? What schools do your children go to? What degrees have you received?” The Korean attitude toward education has been shaped by the teaching of Confucius, who was a great teacher.⁵

It is a subtle but strong message that roars in the ears of young Asian Americans. Eunice Park, a seventeen-year old columnist for *AsianWeek*, captures it well in her essay, “The SATs—1500 or Bust”:

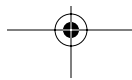
We [Asian American teenagers] are more than the mere sum of our GPAs and SAT scores, which are only shallow measurements of our true selves. Too many don't realize this.

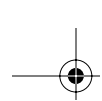
I've already seen what can happen when students base their self-worth on a score: some stand up well in public but in private, they break down from all the pressure; others bare their shame, cry in class if they get a C on a test or miss a few points on a quiz.⁶

Asian American Christians are hardly immune from this pressure. At age seventeen or eighteen, it is very difficult to distinguish the voice of Confucius (with our parents singing lead) from the voice of Jesus. Jesus urges us to “love the Lord your God with all your mind,” affirming the value of education but not as a means to either eternal life or earthly fulfillment. What at its core is a good thing can easily become an idol.

Third, *Confucianism overemphasizes some relationships to the exclusion of others*. Confucianism “is essentially a way of life governed by five relationships: between father and son, husband and wife, elder brother and younger brother, old and young, and the ruler and the ruled. These relationships are vertical and hierarchical in order. Among them, the relationship between the father and son is the key to all other relationships in life.”⁷ These five relationships are a start in the right direction but Confucius doesn't go far enough. Two obvious absences make such structure problematic for Christian faith.

One, women are only addressed if they are married. It raises the question, “Is the only place for a woman as a wife? What about women who sense God's call toward singleness?” The apostle Paul makes a compelling case for singleness (1 Cor 7:1). Confucius's “five relationships” also omit





other family members like widows and divorcees who remain part of the family but could feel disenfranchised by this framework.

Two, if the father-son relationship is indeed the key to all other relationships *and* it is a hierarchical relationship, disagreement between the two generally results in father knows best. If in family life it is indeed the key relationship, then the other next four relationships are severely impacted by a poor father-son relationship.

Confucius was a good teacher, especially within the milieu of his time, but all good teachers have their blind spots and we must recognize he had plenty. There are times when he oversteps his boundaries as “wise uncle” and we must point him to the door as an unwelcome guest. How do you ask someone who has meant so much to you to please leave? Carefully and respectfully.

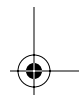
All cultures have their shakers and shapers. Ours is Confucius. As Christians, because we cannot serve two masters, we resist Lord Confucius and call only Jesus Lord.

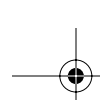
SHAME

A second strand of our Asian DNA is shame. Simply put, Asian Americans are often affected more by shame, European Americans more by guilt, especially those brought up in the church.

European American morality finds its roots in Puritanism and in some biblical principles: the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, Proverbs and to a lesser degree the Sermon on the Mount. Throughout our country's history is the sense of “right is right and wrong is wrong.” Up until recent years when a strong wave of relativism has threatened to wash away these standards, there has been a universal code of behavior, often referred to as “traditional values.”

Stan Inouye, president of Iwa, a ministry to Asian Americans, writes, “While guilt occurs when an absolute standard is violated, shame occurs in a relational context.”⁸ Likewise, Tom Lin writes in *Losing Face and Finding Grace*, “Shame is interwoven into the fabric of the Asian family. Because our actions affect not only ourselves but entire generations of relatives and family, Asian Americans have a tough task ahead when they





make mistakes and try to 'fix' it. Friends and family respond with 'You're not good enough!' or 'Why can't you do this as well as X does it?' or 'How could you shame us like that?'⁹

GOOD SHAME, BAD SHAME

Ken Fong, pastor of Evergreen Baptist Church of Los Angeles, distinguishes between "healthy shame" and "toxic shame":

Healthy shame is an intermittent, proper awareness of being a limited flawed human being. It leads to the acknowledgement of your need for help from a higher power. It is the source of creativity. It is the core of true spirituality. It is the healthy sense of sin that led many of the tax collectors and prostitutes to Jesus to receive forgiveness. *Asians being shame-based can be a real spiritual positive, not a negative, if it creates an ongoing need for Christ in us.*¹⁰

He references two biblical passages:

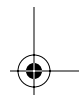
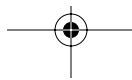
Cover their faces with shame
so that men will seek your name, O LORD. (Ps 83:16)

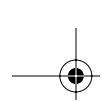
If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives. (1 Jn 1:8-10)

Toxic shame, on the other hand,

is the dark feeling that you are flawed as a human being. In spite of your efforts to change, deep inside, it feels hopeless because you do not believe that genuine change is truly possible. After all, you did not just make a mistake, *you* are the mistake.

It is the reason we do not tell the truth about ourselves. It leads to portraying yourself to be a shameless person. It leads to spiritual bankruptcy that is camouflaged by practiced piety. It is the sin that kept the Pharisees and Sadducees from acknowledging their need for Jesus Christ. It is what prevents our churches from becoming true communities of grace, mercy, holiness and





SIGNS OF TOXIC SHAME IN US

What signs or hints inform us that we are struggling with toxic shame?

- *When someone tells us, “What a great job you did!” and we fire back, “No, no, I messed up with several parts of it.”*
- *When our personal piety seems “too good to be true” to others because it probably is. There is so much shame that our “spiritual cosmetics” attempts to hide our true spiritual condition.*
- *When we are reluctant to talk candidly about our family, especially our relationship with our parents.*
- *When we have a hard time looking our spiritual leaders in the eye.*
- *When admittance to grad school at Cal or the University of Michigan or Columbia feels like a rejection of our personhood because Harvard and Stanford turned us down.*
- *When our public prayers are “I’m such a worm” offerings: filled with remorse, guilt, shame, and total unworthiness. Translation: “How can God stand me? He probably can’t.”*
- *When there is a reluctance to “own” our ethnicity. “I’m American (period, end of conversation, how’s the weather?).”*



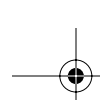
justice. Being driven by toxic shame is like having a hole in your soul.¹¹

Being a leader starts with the recognition that you might have something to offer others. Shame shouts at me, “Who do you think you are, pal, that you think you could actually help that person grow and develop?”

Leadership demands from us the courage to make tough calls. It might be reprimanding someone or even firing them. It might mean being the stand-up person who rallies the troops to take the next hill. Shame shouts at me, “Sit down, worm! You’re not worthy!”

Good leaders call out the best in others. That’s impossible when one sincerely feels change is impossible—in themselves and in others. Spiritual leadership involves helping others go deeper with God. Shame mocks us, sneering, “Look at your own pitiful spiritual life. You missed two quiet times this week and you didn’t share Christ with your coworker last week!” Shame, shame, shame on us!





More than anything, those of us from shame-based cultures need to know and experience God's unconditional, unearnable love. If shame causes you to feel you are a mistake, let these verses seep deeply into your marrow:

Fear not, I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. . . . Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I will give men in exchange for you and people in exchange for your life. (Is 43: 1-4)

Those who look to him are radiant;
their faces are never covered with shame. (Ps 34:5)

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Heb 12:2)

The most powerful shame-killer is the cross on which Jesus chose to die. He "scorned" (or "disregarded," NRSV) the shame of the cross by voluntarily climbing it, taking upon himself the utter humiliation of the spiritual death we deserved.

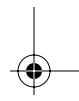
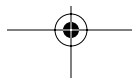


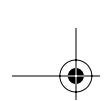
SUFFERING

The suffering of our ancestors informs the present. Thus, the third strand of our Asian DNA is suffering.

For many South Asian nations, colonialism and civil unrest have been consistent themes. Indians struggled for several centuries as Britain's colony, finally gaining independence in 1947. Pakistan, along with its battles with India, has been plagued by constant civil unrest. Sri Lanka is beset by civil wars. Bangladesh fought for its independence from Pakistan, endured a major flood and internal strife.

The history of Cambodians has themes of fleeing extermination, starvation and governmental chaos. Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge annihilated 1.7 million Cambodians, one-fifth of the entire country. Other Southeast Asian countries also suffered badly. Vietnam's history includes 1,400 years of Chinese rule and ninety years as a French colony. Today it is one of the few remaining Communist countries.





Koreans suffered at the hands of both the Chinese and Japanese. Korea has been a divided nation for over fifty years, separating friends and families. Andrew Sung Park in *Racial Conflict and Healing* writes, “Koreans believe themselves to be a *han*-ridden people, a people whose deep psychological wound has become their collective unconscious.”¹²

“*Han* is a sense of unresolved resentment against injustice suffered, a sense of helplessness because of the overwhelming odds against, a feeling of acute pain of sorrow in one’s guts and bowels making the whole body writhe and wiggle, and an obstinate urge to take ‘revenge’ and to right the wrong all these combined,” says Korean theologian Young-Hak Hyun.¹³

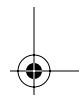
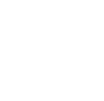
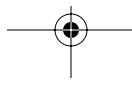
Han is a Korean word but has equivalents in Chinese (*hen*—but much stronger and more negative—“to hate” and “to dislike”) and Japanese (*kon*—“to bear a grudge” and “show resentment”) and Vietnamese (*han*, similar to Korean *han*).

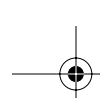
Japan suffered humiliation at the hands of the United States government in the mid-nineteenth century. Led by Commodore Matthew Perry, the United States pressured the highly seclusionary Japan into signing a “treaty of friendship” which opened the door for Western powers to undermine the authority of the *shogunate*, Japan’s military-based leadership, and open trade with Japan on their own terms. About a hundred years later, Japan suffered not just humiliation but mass destruction at the hands of the United States with the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

For Chinese, suffering is the thickest skein in the tapestry of their long history. They have undergone not decades but centuries of famine and starvation. To this day, Chinese will greet each other not with a “Hello, how are you?” but “Have you eaten or not?” or “Have you had rice today?”

China also suffered at the hands of the Japanese. As much as Japan’s government downplays it, Japanese soldiers did “rape Nanking” in the late 1930s during the Sino-Japanese War. Theodore H. White, the eminent historian, and Annalee Jacoby, write in *Thunder Out of China*, “Nanking, Chiang K’ai-shek’s capital, fell on December 12, 1937, and an historic orgy of several weeks of rape, lust, and wanton murder followed.”¹⁴ Two hundred and fifty thousand Chinese were subjected to unwarranted abuse.

Japan’s twentieth-century legacy of evil done to other Asian nations is





shameful to all who carry Japanese blood. While I don't know how much responsibility I bear for the doings of forebears in another land, I do feel great shame and anguish. Every new story about Korean comfort women makes me want to apologize to my Korean American sisters. I am infuriated and saddened by new Japanese textbooks that express a lack of culpability for their twentieth-century atrocities and the refusal of Japan's leaders to own up to their wrongdoing. May God have mercy on them but also break through their hardened hearts to see and confess reality.

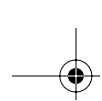
Japanese American suffering has been more recent. Prior to December 7, 1941, over 70 percent of all Japanese Americans lived in California. They "inherited much of the resentment and prejudice that had been directed against the Chinese."¹⁵ Their phenomenal success as farmers increased animosity toward them.

When Pearl Harbor was bombed, it made it easy and convenient for Californians in particular to unleash their racism against Japanese Americans. President Franklin Roosevelt's infamous Executive Order 9066 called for the imprisonment of 120,000 Japanese Americans in "internment camps." Nearly all the fruit of a hard-working immigrant people rotted on the vine. Most lost almost everything.

In the camps, the centrality of nuclear families was threatened. Adolescents often ate with friends, not their families. There was a total lack of privacy in bathrooms. A single room averaging twenty feet by twenty feet was "home" for most families for two to three years. The camp experience bred a deep sense of shame: *We've done something wrong, we must have or our government wouldn't have done this to us, but what is it we have done wrong?*

Living behind barbed wire, with every move scrutinized by armed tower guards, germinated a lack of trust in authority figures. When the internees were released, the unspoken game plan was set in motion: be model citizens, don't protest anything, don't draw attention to yourself and blend in until you appear as white as your neighbor. *Shikata ga nai* ("it cannot be helped, it has to be") and *giri* ("doing what has to be done, quietly, with entirely stoic demeanor") were theme songs to get them through the nightmare.





Clearly, Asian history is laced with episodic suffering. But unlike the Western disposition toward it (suffering is abnormal, an aberration), Asians live with their histories blended with belief systems that see suffering as normative and expected. *Shikata ga nai* and *giri ooze* through our gritted teeth as we passively smile and accept our fate. It gets us through the day but leaves us with no hope for a better tomorrow.

SUFFERING LEADERS

I believe this theme of suffering for Asian Americans can affect our leadership in at least these ways:

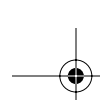
- We will or ought to instinctively take the side of the underdog or those underrepresented or oppressed.
- We have opportunities to counter the long-term oppression of Asian women by giving them every opportunity to grow, develop, lead and succeed.
- Our suffering gives us a common heritage with other ethnic minorities. This should help us see them as comrades not competitors. Rather than being threatened by African Americans, their strengths complement our weaknesses and vice versa. We would make an awesome team. Rather than looking down on Hispanic Americans (especially Mexican Americans) as many of us are prone to do, our shared family values give us much in common.
- As God has “walked alongside” us in our travails, we have experienced his comfort. That comfort should equip us with “who’s hurting?” antennae that lead us to anyone suffering so we might walk with them.

We *can* choose to respond in these ways if we first say no to being a victim who lives by the credo “poor, poor pitiful me.”

OUR FAMILIES

A fourth strand of our Asian DNA is our families. Family means everything to Asian Americans. Wherever we go, we walk with our parents’ shadow in front of us caused by their presence right behind us. Some call it a comforting presence; others a lurking presence, but always a presence.





Our parents can impact our spiritual lives in at least these four ways:

First, *it's easy for us to mistake the voice of parents for God's voice*. Our uniquely high view of parental authority can something lull us to think it's his voice we are hearing when it is only our parents' and out of habit we obey it.

Second, *we carry the Confucian value of filial piety*. We believe that we children must unconditionally honor and obey parents, putting our parents' comfort, issues and wishes before our own.

Third, *our earthly fathers affect our view of the heavenly Father*. If your father is unapproachable, emotionally out of touch, seemingly unconcerned about everyday things in your life, it's very easy to see God the Father as not wanting an intimate relationship with you, one whom you can never really please and one who never hugs.

I was at a student conference when a college senior asked to meet with me. She quickly got to the point. She was going to be spending some time at home in the upcoming summer, and she feared being with her father. Growing up, he would often whip her to discipline her. This went on well into her teen years. I asked, "Are you afraid he will whip you when you go home?" Long pause.

"No . . . I don't think so," she said. When I asked her, "Does your father's behavior influence your view of God the Father?" all she could do was nod, look downward and cry.

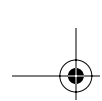
Fourth, *pressure from parents to excel in college often creates conflict over how their children spend time on campus*. Even when parents hold to the same Christian faith, they frequently disapprove of "too much" involvement with parachurch ministries that distracts them from pure academia.

FAMILIES AND LEADERS

It is one thing to become a Christian. That in itself may cause conflict with our parents, especially those of different faiths. To become a Christian leader can jack up the tension between child and parent to a whole new level *even if the parents profess Christian faith*.

In my work with Asian American college students and young adults, I am overwhelmed by the stories of what their discipleship has cost them.





While some have been forsaken by family for simply choosing to follow Jesus (often when leaving the family religion of Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, Islam, etc.), many, *many* more suffer persecution when following him wholeheartedly leads them down paths that shatter their parents' dreams for their lives.

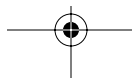
When five Asian American InterVarsity staff were asked to write a discipleship book for young Asian American believers, *Following Jesus Without Dishonoring Your Parents* was the title chosen.¹⁶ How to simultaneously honor one's parents while following Jesus became the consistent and dominant theme that emerged as a central issue in nearly every chapter.

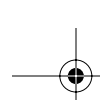
During one of our two writing retreats to work on the book, we were given a living parable of what our book was addressing. David, one of our young Asian American staff, had been beckoned home by his parents. His mom had threatened him: leave staff or I will kill myself. Mom and Dad had sent their oldest son to perhaps the most prestigious university in the country. All their sacrifices had been made for the expected payoff that their son would enter a respectable career and get rich. Becoming an InterVarsity staff worker "*who 'begged' others to allow him to work with the cultic club he had given his life to in college*" was not on their top three or thirty list.

In between discussions of various chapters (like "Pressure, Perfectionism and Performance," "Your Parents Love You, My Parents Love Me" and "Honor and Obey") we called David to see how things were going. We listened, gave bits of advice and prayed for him on the phone. No, his mom didn't kill herself but both parents suffered incredible mental, emotional and physical anguish. And because they were Christians, their faith was challenged to the core.

As we went back to the book, it was clear our book couldn't just give nice principles or address "what if" situations. *Following Jesus Without Dishonoring Your Parents* had to deal with the stuff of life young Asian Americans are often faced with.

For several years after, David lived with the burden of displeasing his parents. At times, it felt unbearable. A year ago, his mom was diagnosed with stage IV stomach cancer. One evening while he was visiting them,





his mom called David over to the sofa on which she was resting. Tears streaming down her cheeks, she took hold of David's hand.

"Davey, there's something I've been wanting to say to you for a long time now," she said. "*I'm so sorry. I'm so sorry.* I know I caused you so much pain in the past few years. I should have supported you and just loved you. I'm so sorry, Davey." David and his mom reconciled.

A few days later, David and his wife shared with his mom and dad their desire to serve God overseas, in hopes of receiving their blessing. They were very nervous. David wrote later:

We were afraid that this would bring about more conflict and that they would feel abandoned by our move. Instead, Dad responded, "It's okay. We think it's okay. You know, we now think that what's most important is that you live a fulfilling life, a happy life. If it will make you happy to go to overseas, then go ahead."

David's father started tearing up. He continued:

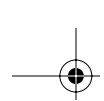
"You know, I've been reflecting so much on my life this past year. I realized that all my dreams have come true. I came to this country, have been given a stable job, two wonderful sons, Mom. I want your dreams to come true."

Then David heard the words he had been praying for and longing to hear for years: "*We support you.*" A few weeks later, David's mom died.¹⁷

Every three years, we gather all the Asian American staff in InterVarsity Christian Fellowship together for a week of fellowship, teaching and encouragement. At each gathering, we have a time where we invite those to come forward whose decision to serve on InterVarsity staff has brought about family conflicts. Generally, one of every three staff comes forward. We then invite senior staff to pray for each of them. Cries of "They hate what I'm doing with my life!" and "I just want Dad to say he's proud of me—just once!" and "I don't think I can keep doing this without their blessing!" fill the air. The wave of emotion sweeps over the rest of us, nearly knocking us over.

Make no mistake, while there is anger, bitterness and resentment, Asian Americans love their families. That is why it hurts so much when we choose a path different from the one our parents have chosen or de-





sired for us. Martin Luther King Jr. said it well: “There is only great disappointment where there is great love.”

LIVING LIMINALLY

Liminality is a fancy word meaning “a place of in-between-ness.” No matter how fluent our English is, how hip and American we dress, how easily we seem to hang with non-Asian Americans, we live in a liminal world. Liminality is the fifth strand of our Asian DNA.

We are always in between, with a foot in this world, a foot in that world. As one writer puts it:

The liminal person is one who has internalized the norms of a particular group but is not completely recognized by the members of that group as being a legitimate member. As long as this relationship prevails, one’s role on countless situations will be ill-defined, or defined in different ways by the individual and the group as a whole. Such liminality leads to uncertainty, ambivalence, and the fear of rejection and failure.¹⁸

Usually it isn’t a balanced in-betweenness. One foot leans more heavily than the other. The closer one is to the immigration experience, generally the greater the lean toward their ethnicity. One might feel more comfortable speaking English but still speaks Korean with their parents or with their close Korean friends. Korean is still their “heart language.”

Liminality jostles my spiritual development because if I don’t have a clear sense of both my Asian and American identities, I don’t always know how to best apply scriptural truths. Living in two worlds also takes a lot of psychic energy. When I attend a bilingual service at my Chinese church and thirty minutes later play baseball with my all-white-but-me team, it’s usually not until about the third inning before I’ve “fully arrived.”

There’s no simple solution to living liminally. Acknowledging it’s real and it affects you is a good first step. Knowing which side you favor or lean more heavily on helps self-understanding. Give yourself grace when you do something odd due to living liminally.

Liminality is not all angst producing. It also brings a richness and un-





predictability to our lives nonminorities don't get to experience. Life is never boring!

All five of these—Confucianism, shame, suffering, our families and liminality—are built into the warp and woof of our lives. We may not be able to quote Confucius's *Analects*. We may not tell someone, "My *han* level is high today—it would be best if you kept your distance." We may not wear badges that say "I'm suffering today—please hug me," or "I don't do guilt. I do shame." We might not tell someone about some deep family hurts the first time we meet. But if we look beneath our surface, they're there and they affect our spiritual lives as leaders.

