

Raise Your Voice: Why We Stay Silent and How to Speak Up
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"But now I realize that we can't wait to act until we are personally affected by something."

The Injustice We Do Not Understand

We often stay silent and do nothing by convincing ourselves the offense isn't actually that offensive. Sometimes we don't speak up because the injustice doesn't affect our daily lives. We don't understand the impact of a law or the injustice inflicted on others because it doesn't impact the people closest to us or it isn't a matter of our heart or heart language.

Queen Esther may have been able to avoid getting involved if it wasn't for the actions of her uncle Mordecai. In Esther 3, when the king ordered all royal officials to kneel before Haman the Agagite, Mordecai refused. There is a passing mention that others in the king's court knew Mordecai was Jewish, but it's unclear whether Mordecai's refusal was a religious or personal protest. Regardless, Haman was offended by Mordecai's behavior and blamed all the Jews, not just Mordecai. Haman asked the king to issue a decree to have the Jews destroyed. The royal secretaries were summoned, and they made sure the message was clearly communicated:

They wrote out the script of each province and in the language of each people all Haman's orders to the king's satraps, the governors of the various provinces and the nobles of the various peoples. . . . A copy of the text of the edict was to be issued as law in every province and made known to the people of every nationality so they would be ready for that day.
(Esther 3:12, 14)

In response to the decree, Mordecai persuades Esther to appeal to the king on behalf of all the Jews. Esther became invested in seeking justice because it affected her personally.

At my children's elementary school Pilgrim Celebration, when I saw that many of the parents were judging a woman who was dressed inappropriately, I had *just* enough courage to go stand with her because I know what it feels like to be judged by my appearance. I've been the focus of teasing, bullying, and sexualization my entire life due to my physical characteristics as a Korean American woman. I stood with the woman, not because I was Native American or had friendships with Native Americans who could've told me about the pain and danger of stereotypes, but because I had faced similar situations. I knew in my gut that stereotyping and racist depictions of the Wampanoag people was wrong. So why wasn't that enough for me to speak up to the teachers in charge of the event? At the time, the offense didn't cut to my heart deep enough to compel me to act. But now I realize that we can't wait to act until we are personally affected by something. If we wait to have a personal interaction with everyone of a different ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, etc., before we act or speak up against injustice, it will take an eternity.

A good and painful example of this is the #BlackLivesMatter movement that emerged in 2013. It was started by three black women in response to the acquittal of George Zimmerman



Kathy Khang is a speaker, journalist, and activist. She has worked in campus ministry for more than twenty years, with expertise in issues of gender, ethnicity, justice, and leadership development. She is a columnist for *Sojourners* magazine, a writer for *Faith & Leadership*, and a coauthor of *More Than Serving Tea: Asian American Women on Expectations, Relationships, Leadership and Faith*.

in the fatal shooting of Trayvon Martin, a black teenager. It seemed that an armed adult man's sense of safety was valued more than Martin's life, and people publically questioned on both social media and in their communities whether or not black lives mattered. The movement gained traction in 2014 with the police shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and the choking death of Eric Garner in New York City. Anger, pain, and a call to action spilled out into the streets. Protesters demanded the public take notice.

As things in New York City and Ferguson were percolating, I was on sabbatical after fifteen years in vocational ministry. I was supposed to be resting and recovering, dreaming about what might happen professionally and personally in my next chapter of life, as well as asking God for a burning bush of clarity. Instead I found myself unable to turn away from the news coverage of the violence against black women and men – not because I was in similar danger, but because I was and had been purposefully listening to black friends and colleagues who had lived and were still living this experience.

As a Korean American woman, I have learned to expect to be catcalled or be on the receiving end of racist, sexist epithets. It doesn't matter where I am – in the city, at an airport, or in my neighborhood. It's usually in city settings where men of any and all skin colors think it's fine to say to me, "Hello, lady! Why don't you give me a smile?" and expect me to respond in kind. I don't. Greeting me with "Konichiwa!" is also unwelcome and not likely to get a positive response. I spent most of my childhood in the suburbs and can still remember the bullies, even in high school, who didn't like the way this so-called "chink" looked, stood, or breathed.

I grew up with a healthy suspicion of police officers, but when I got pulled over in 1993 for the first time because I was speeding just south of Green Bay, Wisconsin, I never feared for my life. In fact, I wondered if the officer and I would recognize each other because I was a local newspaper reporter at the time. My parents never warned me about interactions with law enforcement. They also never considered calling the police when rocks were thrown through our window or trash was thrown on our yard.

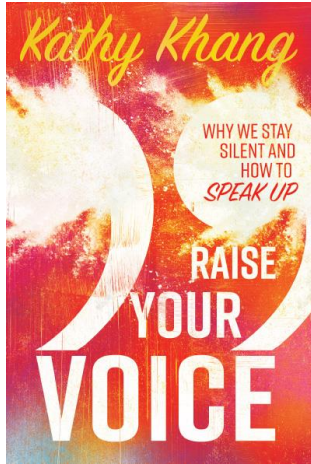
I was unnerved as I watched the Ferguson situation unfold on the news; Michael Brown's body laid on the hot pavement for hours. It was heartbreaking and frightening. I felt it deeper than I had in previous similar situations because I was also following the reactions on social media of my black and brown friends, friends and colleagues – people I didn't have earlier in my life. The racism of the situation was familiar, but their specific experiences and context were new to me. Through their own deep pain, anger, and fear, they were teaching me a new language and framework to understand racial injustice. I more clearly understood the unjust laws and rules, written and unspoken, that affected their lives. I began to understand those edicts – defined by skin color – that had been written against and for them and their communities, just as I had learned to understand similar injustices that were reserved for Asian Pacific Islanders. You learn to understand injustice and better speak



BOOK EXCERPT

about it when you are immersed in it.

It's no coincidence that there was an uptick in addressing racism, sexism, and faith in my social media presence and when I spoke in public. The more I read books by authors of color, the more I listened to my Asian and Asian American, Latino, Native, and black and brown friends and colleagues, and the more I was willing to make mistakes and understand points of connection between "them" and "us," the more clear the injustice became.



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"This isn't about screaming your opinions but about bringing about the kingdom on earth in whatever capacity and community we can."

— **Kathy Khang**, author of *Raise Your Voice*

God's People Were Not Created to Be Silent

In some communities, certain voices are amplified and elevated while others are erased and suppressed. It can be hard to speak up, especially in the ugliness of social media. Power dynamics keep us silent and marginalized, especially when race, ethnicity, and gender are factors. What can we do about it?

Activist Kathy Khang roots our voice and identity in the image of God. Because God created us in our ethnicity and gender, our voice is uniquely expressed through the totality of who we are. We are created to speak, and we can both speak up for ourselves and speak out on behalf of others. Khang offers insights from faithful heroes who raised their voices for the sake of God's justice, and she shows how we can do the same today, in person, in social media, in organizations, and in the public square. Here are some of the topics and questions she tackles in *Raise Your Voice*:

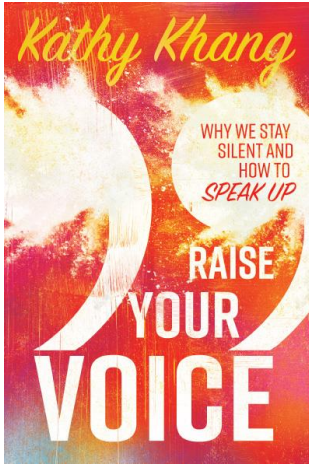
- Your book is about finding your voice, and you expressly state that everyone has a voice. Why is finding your voice so critical in the twenty-first century?
- How does the Bible give us examples of where God's people raised their voices for justice?
- What does it mean for you to walk away from being a spokesperson for all of Christianity?
- How did you come to terms with the difference between being a critic and exacting change?
- How do you both amplify your own voice and also help your children (or those vulnerable around you) find their own voices?
- Your book talks about becoming a citizen eight years ago. What is it like being a new US citizen during the Trump presidency?
- How is your book like the bestselling Sheryl Sandberg book *Lean In*? How does it differ?
- You also discuss addressing failure. How does examining your own shortcomings help to amplify your voice for long term improvement?
- When is silence necessary for survival?
- How do you raise your voice when you feel like an imposter in your own world?
- Why is moral license a problem in the church? How can raising your voice help to combat that problem?
- What's the difference between raising your voice and waiting on change? Why are both necessary?

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“Raise Your Voice comes at an imperative time and the church would do well to listen.”

“We live in a loud, hyperconnected world where finding and using your voice for good can seem like a daunting, if not impossible, charge. And yet all Christians are called to speak the truth in love. So it’s more important than ever to find wise and experienced guides for this new terrain. Kathy Khang is one of those guides, and in *Raise Your Voice* she offers insights that are both philosophical and practical, biblically informed and tested in the lab of real-world experience. By incorporating stories from her own triumphs and failures, as well as the stories of other prophets and practitioners, Khang guides the reader along with the experience of a teacher and the warmth of a dear friend. I gained so much wisdom from spending time in these pages, and I hope everyone who wishes to use their voice with integrity and holy force will do the same.”

— **Rachel Held Evans**, author of *Searching for Sunday*

“*Raise Your Voice* is a powerful call to action. The book is full of moving personal stories, excellent writing, and judiciously scattered solid theology. This delightfully written book summoning us to courageous action to promote racial, gender, and economic justice could not come at a better time. Khang calls us to speak out. And she helps us see how to do it.”

— **Ronald J. Sider**, distinguished professor of theology, holistic ministry, and public policy, Palmer Seminary at Eastern University

“A powerful call to action.”

“From the first chapter, Khang’s book *Raise Your Voice* brings you in. She masterfully uses her story, biblical passages, and wisdom of the everyday to create an insightful and practical tool. Leaders, artists, writers, and anyone who feels that God has put something in them (everyone!) will be refreshed, challenged, and spurred on. This book is a compass, instead of a map, that helps you navigate terrain that has no roads. Khang’s book provides an essential tool for navigating the tricky pathways of following Jesus in real life — evolving social media, racial land mines, and increasingly polarized communities. *Raise Your Voice* is an honest, funny, and utterly practical book. You will want it on your shelf to refer to over and over again.”

— **Nikki Toyama-Szeto**, executive director of Evangelicals for Social Action

“There have been a number of books in the past several years about the need to speak up. What Khang accomplishes in *Raise Your Voice* is a significant addition. The book explores the motivations behind silence, deconstructs them, and suggests ways to rebuild them into motivations for prophetic speech. Khang is a builder and careful arguer who engages and

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ENDORSEMENTS

challenges readers to notice not only their own fears of speaking up, but also ways in which they might contribute to silencing others. *Raise Your Voice* comes at an imperative time and the church would do well to listen.”

— **Preston Yancey**, author of *Out of the House of Bread*

“Kathy Khang has crafted a gift for us—receive every page she offers you!”

“In a time of social division growing wider every day, so many of us struggle with how to engage in all that is happening around us. Often it’s easier to retreat and ignore the chaos and confusion rather than to try to wrestle with how God might have us respond. Kathy Khang challenges us to see that our trust in God’s sovereignty is not independent of our responsibility to act. She guides us through why it is biblical for us to learn to use our voice for good, and imperative to stand against injustice in order that our silence might not become complicit.”

— **Vickie Reddy**, executive producer, The Justice Conference

“As I read *Raise Your Voice* I remembered the times I needed a book like this! I needed its invitation to discover my voice when I felt invisible and voiceless. I needed its mentoring when I started out in leadership, wondering if I could lead in the way I was wired to, rather than fit uncomfortably into a more culturally acceptable mold. I needed its wisdom to help me discern the cost of having a voice and daring to use it, and then its comfort when using my voice ended in hurt. *Raise Your Voice* is here now, and I still received all the things I’d once longed for and more—challenge and empowerment in equal measure. Kathy Khang has crafted a gift for us—receive every page she offers you!”

— **Jo Saxton**, author of *The Dream of You*, cohost of the *Lead Stories Podcast*

“As a reporter and church leader, Kathy Khang has spent her life lending her voice to other people’s stories. This book is essential reading for those who wonder about the spiritual power of saying hard truths out loud.”

— **Kate Bowler**, assistant professor of American Christianity, Duke Divinity School