

**A LETTER TO MY YOUNGER SELF**

**BY**

**ADA CHENG**

**CHARACTERS:**

Student: An international student from China. Any gender.

Ada: A middle-aged woman from Taiwan, in her 50s, a staff member working at the university doing training and outreach on gender-based violence.

**SETTING:**

There are two chairs on stage. The student and Ada are sitting slightly facing each other and reading email exchanges. They have never met and will never meet in person.

**TIME:**

The first email was sent by the student in mid-February 2020.

**STUDENT**

Dear university staff: Hello. I want to report an insulting incident that happened to us today. My friends and I were at this building trying to grab some coffee. We were waiting in line, and finally, when it was our turn to order, we stepped forward. During that short time, we heard an absurd racist joke that people at the cashier made, saying, "Watch out for the Corona virus."

As everybody knows, the Corona virus is a global issue that has taken away more than 500 innocent lives. Treating us as that virus is both humiliating and insulting to the people who are suffering and fighting for that contagious disease.

It is very unfortunate that this occurred during the Black History Month, the month that we all believe everybody should not be discriminated by the color of their skin.

I hope you examine this issue. We sincerely want an apology for this inconvenience.

Sincerely,

Student

**ADA**

Dear student: Thank you for the message. I am very sorry this happened to you. I would like to meet in person to discuss the situation further. Let me know when you can stop by.

Ada

**STUDENT**

Dear Ada, Thank you for your kindness.

We were all furious about the incident. However, after knowing that there are people who care for minorities like us, it gives us pride, knowing that we chose to come to this school.

Again, thank you for offering us options to deal with this matter, but we have decided not to make a scene.

Student

**ADA**

Dear student: I don't think you will ever read this message. I do hope at some point you will tell this story on your own.

I haven't been able to sleep for days since I received your email. That last sentence, "we have decided not to make a scene," hit me hard.

That sentence has filled me with sadness. It feels like someone has driven a knife slowly into my heart. I am not going to die from it, but my heart aches and bleeds with each gentle cut and push.

Your message was the first complaint I received, but it was not the first one I have heard. Since the outbreak of the coronavirus, we have seen an increase of hatred toward Chinese people, people of Asian descent, or Asian Americans in general. Physical assaults have taken place; racial slurs hurled; suspicious looks cast; masks put on specifically when Asian people are present; otherwise socially conscious people making jokes and references about the virus and Chinese people;

businesses in Chinatown plummeted due to misinformation, xenophobia, and racism.

In a world where racism is often seen between Blacks and Whites, discrimination, prejudice, racism, and xenophobia toward and against Asians are often taken for granted and normalized that even UC at Berkeley briefly posted something online along the line: Xenophobia is a normal response after the outbreak. Our own President insisted on calling the virus Chinese or Wuhan virus knowing fully well that the pandemic will bring out preexisting hatred, xenophobic sentiments, and racist assaults against people of Asian descent. Different universities sent warning emails to students about the virus yet very few made public statements denouncing anti-Asian racism.

We don't label any germ, disease, illness, or virus White when they wiped out Native American tribes, why do we label Corona Asian? This pandemic shows how easily we, as Asian Americans, can go from being Model Minority to Yellow Peril in this country within seconds.

But what I want to write here is not about the virus. It is about that last sentence of yours: We have decided not to make a scene. I truly see you because you remind me of my younger self, when I used to believe that people would understand where I was

coming from and empathize with my position if I were polite enough, respectful enough, articulate enough, or liked enough.

And then it downed on me one day: My degree of politeness, respectfulness, or likability has little to do with whether people can grasp the complexity of issues. For many, they understand them all along.

In my/our culture, I was taught since I was young to be quiet, to not speak up, to not challenge authorities, and to keep peace and maintain harmony. I had to work very hard to develop my own voice and to have one.

When I was younger, I tried hard to balance between having a voice and wanting to be liked, having ideas/opinions and being seen too opinionated/loud, and telling people how I really felt/what I really thought and not wanting to alienate anyone with my truths.

I still struggle with that. And I am in my 50s.

The reality is: There is no balance. It is a lose-lose situation. For me, as a woman.

I do have the benefit of racial perception: I am hardly seen as militant or aggressive as an Asian woman even when I am, compared to a Black woman, who can easily be seen as aggressive even when she is simply being assertive. My body, as much as it

may be sexually objectified, exoticized, or violated, is not seen as threatening, thus allowing me to "freely" navigate the world without anyone calling the police on me.

And we know the ways our bodies are perceived can have life and death consequences.

But the worst part is this: When you don't practice speaking up for yourself, you end up losing the only voice you have.

Your own.

I want you to remember this:

Silence can be a strength, but it isn't always a virtue.

Being quiet doesn't always bring you peace.

Being polite doesn't always keep you out of trouble.

Being respectful doesn't always get you the respect in return.

Please learn to tell your own story as I can't always tell stories for others.

Learn to shout. On top of your lung.

Make a scene.

Be the troublemaker.

Be the trouble.

For yourself and others.

It's time.

It's time.

Ada

THE END