

A responsibility to speak out

BY FRANK H. WU

As an Asian American humbled to lead an institution of higher education, I was appalled by the recent remarks of the Purdue University Northwest Chancellor. Presiding over a commencement ceremony, Thomas L. Keon used gibberish as a mockery of Asian languages, which is so familiar to those of us who faced the common cruelty of childhood bullying. I wish to explain why this expression of racial prejudice is so disturbing. I know I have friends who wonder why it shouldn't just be excused as a bit of humor.

When I was a kid growing up in the Midwest in the 1970s, I was teased and taunted in the same manner. On the playground during recess, my peers shouted racial slurs, pulled their eyes back into slants and issued the dare to a kung fu fight. Their parents, as volunteers, looked on, recommending the response of "Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me."

Even as a kid, I knew that retort was for

perennial losers. Words lead to the sticks and stones, because rhetoric instigates violence. We saw that during the pandemic in the brutal attacks, many crippling or fatal, as aggressors blamed people who looked Asian, and some who were Latino, for the virus and told them to go back to where they came from — before shoving them to the ground and kicking them in the head, or worse.

The words themselves also pack their own punch, microaggressions that add up to send the message that you and your kind do not belong and never will. Although it is easy enough for those who inflict the trauma to dismiss it as trivial, these situations are not symmetrical since one community ends up being the butt of the joke again and again and again.

Some people even condescended further. They attempted to rationalize their rudeness, which at its core is racial, as the ordinary hazing of foreigners. That makes it apparent they are stereotyping. Asian Americans are not foreigners. They include fifth-generation New

Yorkers whose ancestors founded Chinatown before those who would make fun of them had arrived on these shores. It is hardly civil to jeer at those who are pejoratively called "fresh off the boat."

In this case, the individual responsible for the recent transgression is entrusted with educating a heterogeneous population. Imagine what the Asian American students celebrating their graduation, whether native born or newcomers, and their Asian parents and grandparents sitting in the audience, must have felt at the open disrespect. The institution claims to have enrolled its most diverse entering class this past year.

Keon's half-hearted apology, one of those which is hardly worth issuing, suggests that nothing has been learned. One of his vice chancellors even suggested he was being quoted out of context. That is more laughable than what he emitted. The speaker before Keon, a radio personality, described how he uses a fake language with his grandchildren. Keon then was inspired to offer his "Asian"

interpretation, as if he would teach youngsters to ridicule people who look different even if they are trying desperately to assimilate.

As someone who has been privileged to serve in senior administrative roles in higher education, I strive to be sensitive to combatting discrimination and am aware that I can do better. The issue is whether people wish to try to live up our stated ideals. Our students will not hesitate to call out what is "performative."

The principles at stake are greater than any group that is aggrieved in a specific case. In public, and private as well, we are confronting the challenge of whether a democracy can be diverse and therefore benefit from a multiplicity of perspectives, experiences and cultures.

That is why I feel a responsibility to stand up and speak out. I will do so not only against anti-Asian American hostility, but also bigotry involving all groups, races, religions, genders and peoples. That is a part of our responsibility as educators in helping to prepare students to understand the relevance of diversity, equity and inclusion in their careers and lives.

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