

## Corona Chronicle

Week 54

Monday, March 22nd

Coronavirus fatalities in the U.S. as of today: 544,000

Last Tuesday, March 16<sup>th</sup>, a 21-year-old white man, Robert Aaron Long, drove to three different Atlanta-area “spas” (massage parlors) which employed Asian women, or women of Asian descent, and carried out a shooting rampage, in the end killing eight people, six of them Asian or Asian-American women, before he was captured 150 miles away, supposedly on his way to Florida to continue his killing spree.

Why is there so much murderous hatred in this country? But I suppose I could ask why is there so much murderous hatred *in the world*, since such things (and worse) are at the same time going on all over the globe? Yet to generalize a specific crime or malady is to blunt the horror of it, and I do not want to do that here.

Supposedly, Mr. Long’s motivation for this rampage was his hatred of his “sex addiction”; he reportedly told the officer who arrested him that he needed to “remove these temptations.” One might wonder why Mr. Long believed *he* deserved to live in a world minus these “temptations,” while the *women* (and one non-Asian man and his non-Asian wife) did *not*?

The answer, I believe, is *objectification*. When we see *ourselves* as the subject, the one for whom everything else exists, or our social group as the people/race that make up the “true” people and *raison d’être* of this nation, or even when we see the human race as the “crown” of Creation, with all of the rest of Creation put here only to *serve us*, we are objectifying people, or other created beings – turning them into *things*. Carrying on an *I-it* relationship with the world, rather than the sacred one of *I-thou*.

Now it would seem that Robert Long, like Dylann Roof (who in 2015 murdered 9 members of a Bible study group, all of whom were Black, in Charleston’s “Mother Immanuel” AME Church) must also have been insane. Who kills women because he finds them sexually desirable rather than taking a cold shower, or, better, seeking out a mental health professional? Only a crazy person, right? But there is another ingredient to this madness. It is not just about sex. It is about the “other-ing” that we in this country have done towards people from Asia since the mid-1800’s, when appreciable numbers of immigrants first began to arrive in California from China, and to some extent were welcomed by white Californians, since they

were an easily-exploitable labor force for the building of the railroads and for other manual labor involved in the California Gold Rush.

In 1875, the Page Act barred the immigration of Chinese or other East Asian women into this country, with the excuse that they were seen as being brought here “to engage in prostitution.” (On Dec. 7<sup>th</sup>, 1875, President Grant said in an address to Congress: “...I invite the attention of Congress to another, though perhaps no less an evil--the importation of Chinese women, but few of whom are brought to our shores to pursue honorable or useful occupations.”)

Eventually, there was some loosening of these exclusions so that Chinese men could marry Chinese women (or bring their wives from China) and have families on these shores – but in 1882, the Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which attempted to halt all Chinese immigration to the U.S. for ten years. In the buildup to this law, some white politicians and labor organizers vilified the Chinese, telling Americans that they were “stealing their jobs,” and denying them the right of becoming citizens or voting. Later, as we know, there was a wave of immigration to the West Coast from Japan, and we are all familiar with the removal of these Japanese Americans to relocation camps during World War II.

What was really going on here? Perhaps there were indeed some white Americans in 1882 who believed that their difficulty in finding employment was due to these immigrants who worked so hard for so little. And, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, it is not hard to imagine that some white Americans did not trust these fellow citizens who (they believed) might have sympathy with our enemy, Japan, and somehow be pressed into attacking us from within. But, as in most cases of ethnic discrimination, there were other factors at work: these people look different, they dress differently, they speak a strange-sounding language, they are not “Christians,” their customs are different...the same list can be made about almost every new wave of immigrants (even if they are Christian, then they might be the *wrong kind* of Christian).

But in the case of Asian *women*, in particular, there has for a long time been another kind of “othering,” which I would call the othering of “exoticism.” In this case, the “different-ness” of Asian women, in the eyes of some white men, is seen as something alluring – like a new kind of spice or tobacco...but not to the extent that a man might like to *get to know* an Asian woman as a fully equal human being to himself. No, she is still a *commodity*, believed to be submissive and attuned to granting men honor and pleasure (the lore of the geisha girl in Japan’s culture – or,

until the pandemic precluded it, of “sex tourism” for wealthy Western businessmen in Thailand). And in fact there *is* a mostly-ignored problem of sexually trafficked women in this country, many (but certainly not *all*) of them from Asian countries. (A few years ago we heard much in the news about forced labor by Asian and non-Asian women in nail salons around this country, as well...which had nothing to do with sex, per se, but everything to do with exploitation.)

On the down side of “exotic,” however, is “other.” Not us. Not deserving of the same rights and regard that we give “our own.” The person doing the “othering” does not think about this “exotic” person having hopes and dreams, a mother and father, brothers and sisters, perhaps a child or spouse – in other words, that this is a human being who is the *subject* of their own life, not just the “object” to provide “spice” or pleasure to them as a client, or who can be easily kicked out of the country or eliminated (as Mr. Long did) when they have no more use for them.

And of course it is a gross and unfair stereotype to associate Asian or Asian-American women with subservience or sexual service. That is why many people are hoping that Mr. Long’s mass murder will be tried as a hate crime in Georgia, since Long singled out spas run by and/or featuring Asian women, seemingly to murder people belonging to this specific description, demonizing them as the source of his “addiction.”

As it turns out, by coincidence – or, as some people call it, as a matter of “synchronicity” – I happened to see a very joyful video-post on Facebook this past week, by someone who was once a close friend, about his daughter, Maya Sayarath. Maya just found out that she had been accepted to her number-one choice of medical residencies – at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston. The video shows Maya, whose father, Bouaketh Sayarath, was a refugee to this country from Laos, opening her laptop to read an email in which her acceptance to a surgical residency at Brigham and Women’s is announced. Maya and her mother and sister are so excited, they are screaming with joy; even the family dog in the video seems excited! When I opened the video and the sound of these joyous cries emanated out from my speakers, Lev came running into my study to see what it was all about. Despite the fact that he had no idea who these people were, he too felt their joy.

So I wanted to close out this week’s chronicle with a positive story about a refugee from Southeast Asia, and about his smart, strong (and, incidentally, beautiful) daughter. Maya’s father, Dr. Bouaketh Sayarath, was born in rural Laos during the

early years of U.S. intervention in Southeast Asia. His family was from one of Laos' over 100 different ethnic groups known as the Khmu, or the "Khmu hill tribe." His father had been involved with the Pathet Lao (aka the "Laotian People's Liberation Army") when Laos was being used as a proxy theater of conflict between the superpowers during the Cold War. I don't remember all the details that Bouaketh told me back in 1983, but I know that his family was frequently on the move because of the fighting, and that eventually he ended up separated from his family, in a Buddhist orphanage in Vientiane, Laos, later making his way by boat (across the Mekong River) to a newly-formed refugee camp in Thailand. He did not know what had become of the rest of his family (except that his father had been killed in the war when he was only four). Bouaketh was a bright young boy, and a Jewish English professor, Dr. Lawrence Levy, who was doing volunteer work in the camp, took a liking to him. Dr. Levy and his wife decided to sponsor Bouaketh as a refugee to America. As I recall the story, tragically, both Dr. Levy and his wife died fairly soon after his arrival to America, and Bouaketh was raised in a series of foster homes in Pennsylvania. He was lucky: they were good families, and they encouraged him to study hard.

When I met Bouaketh, he was a student at Harvard, but living in the uppermost floor of a Catholic rectory in Roxbury, where the priests had taken a liking to him. (Despite Bouaketh's family's left-leaning sympathies in Laos, they had at some point become Catholics, and always turned to the Catholic church for refuge.) Bouaketh was determined to become a doctor, in a way following in the footsteps of his father, who had been a folk-medicine healer. From what I have since gleaned (we just reconnected on Facebook shortly before this pandemic hit), although Bouaketh did eventually go to medical school (at age 40!), he works as a science teacher (and tennis coach) at a boarding school in Vermont now (St. Johnsbury Academy), primarily practicing medicine on his overseas service trips to his home country of Laos, where the people are still desperately poor, and have few opportunities to see a Western medical doctor. In recent correspondence with Bouaketh, he wrote me that despite his not practicing medicine much in this country, "...I do live [my ideals] and follow my idols, Dr. Schweitzer, Dr. Tom Dooley, and Mother Theresa by serving the poor during our service trips in northern Laos. You should see how many patients line up to see me and my students in the villages!"

I am sure that Dr. Sayarath (the elder) feels a deep vicarious joy with the phenomenal success of his daughter, Maya, who graduated first from Mt. Holyoke

College, and then from U. Minnesota Medical School. As Maya’s father was the first Khmu-Lao naturalized American citizen to become a medical doctor in the U.S., so Maya is now the first Khmu-Lao-American medical doctor born in this country.

Why do I “chronicle” all this? Because in this era of recurring eruptions of hatred and fear of immigrants, and of backlashes against women who will not be “submissive,” it is important to see what a great contribution refugees and immigrants, and their children, are making to our nation and to our world – if only given the chance. Our country is truly unique in the world because of our diversity, and because no one group of people can rightfully claim that *their* culture or ethnic group is the “real” America. (If any group *could* say it, it would be our Indigenous peoples, but they form many separate nations, with different customs and languages, so they are just as diverse amongst themselves!)

Maya Sayarath, M.D., daughter of Vicki Godin-Sayarath and Bouaketh Sayarath, sister of Melanie, a new doctor in the powerhouse that is the Boston medical complex – may your light and power shine out as an inspiration to all your Asian and Asian-American sisters. And thank you for a story of joy in the midst of this still-dark time!



*Maya during her medical school days. (photo courtesy of Maya Sayarath)*