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## Women of Color Reclaiming Power

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*Boston's Asian Task Force Against Domestic Violence*

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# Women of Color Reclaiming Power

By  
Rev. Cheng Imm Tan

*The following is the address that was given at the Sixth Annual Women of Color Day Celebration at the University of Massachusetts at Boston on March 5, 1993.*

I want to begin by telling you a story.

There was once an owl who met a princess. They met each other one dark night when the princess was outside on the balcony, searching for the stars and the moon and instead she heard the hooting of the owl. They started talking and soon got into deep conversation. From then on, they talked deep into the night, night after night. Before too long they both realized that they had fallen in love with one another. And so, one night the princess said, "Dear owl, we are deeply in love with one another. Why don't we get married?" The owl loved the princess very much but he thought to himself, "The princess loves me but she has never seen my face. I am an owl. How could I marry a beautiful princess?" But the princess was so happy and excited about the idea that he agreed.

So they set a date for the marriage. On the day of the marriage celebration, the owl sent the rooster to tell the princess that he would be late and to start the festivities without him. The guests had arrived and the food was all laid out. The music started to play, so they started the festivities. When night fell, the owl arrived, and as soon as the owl arrived, the princess ran into his arms and they danced to the beautiful music that was playing. They danced and danced deep into the night, absorbed only with presence of each other.

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*No one would ever feel bad about themselves or powerless if they were always treated with respect.*

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Without their noticing it, day was dawning and the rooster heralded the new day in with a deep, long crow. And as the first sun's rays fell on the owl's face, the princess saw the owl's face for the first time and she thought to herself, what a magnificent, beautiful face. But before the princess could say anything, the owl leaped onto his horse and rode away as fast as he could, and never returned. So now, whenever the rooster crows, the princess thinks of her beloved owl.

Sometimes, I think many of us feel like the owl. We often feel inadequate, not beautiful; incompetent, unlovable, a fake. Sometimes we even think of ourselves as stupid, ineffective, and maybe even inferior. Most of the time, we don't pay attention to these feelings. We don't let ourselves get affected by them. We sweep them

into some closet and we keep on doing what we are doing, and in doing so, many of us have accomplished a lot in our lives. Until some small disaster happens or something goes wrong and then the "blues" descend and we feel depressed and bad about ourselves.

We are often our own worst critics. We will often focus on the little things that we did not do quite just right, rather than the many and numerous things we have handled well and competently.

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*In a racist and sexist world, our realities are hardly ever alluded to, let alone affirmed.*

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The reality is that we, women of color, as human beings, are inherently and irresistibly beautiful and gorgeous; incredibly intelligent, competent and powerful; capable of making everything go right in our lives and in the world. And, as human beings, we are by nature closely connected with each other. We are naturally curious about each other and we desire to know each other more and to be close to each other. As human beings, we women of color are inherently powerful. Do you remember a time, perhaps when you were very young when you felt like you could do anything, when you were full of life and confidence, when you scoffed at the fears and advice of your parents, when death was something to be dared rather than feared. Do you remember a time when you had dreams?...

But, like the owl, we have fallen out of touch, we have forgotten the nature of our true beautiful selves. We often feel inferior and less than. We have forgotten our inherent power and close human connectedness. We are often afraid of or at least are suspicious of each other. And none of it is our fault.

No one would ever feel bad about themselves or powerless if they were always treated with respect. All of us would feel like we could do anything, if in our lives, there were high expectations of us, if people believed in us, had confidence in us and told us we could succeed. None of us would be distrustful of each other if we were given accurate information about each other, if we were not told to stay away from each other, and sometimes to be fearful of each other.

However, over and over in our lives, as women and as women of color, we were told by people around us—by the culture, social attitudes, media, school, etc.—that we were not good enough, not smart enough, not fast enough, not thin enough, not white enough, not silent enough...

In a racist and sexist world, our realities are hardly ever alluded to, let alone affirmed; the way we see ourselves and the way we experience the world is hardly ever reflected in the images we see around us or in the stories we read. We constantly have to translate information in order to make it relevant and applicable to our lives. Our realities, experiences are often discounted, overlooked and ignored.

Both racism and sexism make us feel bad about ourselves and about each other. Sexism devalues our

humanness, our goodness, abilities and power as females and encourages us to compete to get male attention. Racism devalues our humanness, our goodness, abilities and power as people of color, feeds false information about each other and pits us one against each other. It is no wonder that we have a hard time trying to remember who we really are and our natural deep connections with each other.

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*Both racism and sexism make us feel bad about ourselves and about each other.*

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As a community of women of color, we have all felt the effects of both racism and sexism. But the way racism and sexism work on each community of color is quite specific and different. (The stereotypes and messages put out for and about Hispanic, Afro-American, and Asian women are not quite the same, for example.)

Last spring, I had an insight about the operations of racism in the United States. I was at a conference titled "Women for Change." The verdict on Rodney King's beating by the Los Angeles police officers had just come out and violence had broken out in Los Angeles. A discussion on racism followed. For the first time, I noticed that people were talking about racism only in black-white terms. Since then everywhere I go, whether it is a talk, conference, discussion on TV, I've noticed that racism is cast primarily in black-white terms.

It made me realize why I had felt kind of crazy all these years. When racism is primarily described in black-white terms, it denies and ignores the effects of racism on other groups of color and therefore allows it to go on without protest. The struggles of other communities of color—Asians, native Americans, Hispanics to name a few—against racism are invalidated and made invisible.

My experienced reality and what was supposed to be happening were out of sync. As an immigrant Asian woman, I was aware that racism against Afro-Americans existed. Racism against black Americans has had a long history, is well-documented and publicly acknowledged. However, the overriding message is that Asians were not as oppressed. In fact, Asians were called the model minority. We were portrayed as making it by using dubious indicators. The primary goal of the model-minority thesis is to obscure the realities of racism. The argument that Asian cultural values and hard work are the keys to success was made as an indictment on other communities of color, particularly the black community, and to advance the impression that the United States was a fair society that judged and rewarded people [on their merit], not by the color of their skin. Racism, according to this thesis was not the real obstacle in the advancement of people of color. It is significant that the model-minority thesis came about in the early seventies on the heels of the civil rights era and black activism. This thesis served not only to make Asian oppression invisible but to pit Asians, in particular, against other communities of color.

Lies about other groups of color have been imposed on

Asians even before they came to this country. This misinformation, combined with language barriers and lack of access to accurate information about the operations of racism in the United States, in general, have often resulted in the ease in which Asians have been isolated from and pitted against other groups of color. On the other hand, the lack of accurate information about Asians, Asian culture, Asian history and the history of Asian oppression—including the current invisibility of Asian oppression together with the myth of the model minority—encourages other groups to view Asians as the "ones who make it, at the expense of others."

The perception that Asians are not oppressed is quite different from the experienced reality of Asians in the United States. Like other groups of color, Asians are systematically discriminated against, overlooked, ignored, terrorized, and killed. For example, Asians (no matter how many generations we have been here) are still not considered full citizens. Just the other day, a fourth-generation Asian American was told to "go home" by a white woman on Beacon Hill. Hate crimes among Asians are disproportionately high. In the Boston area, Asians are five times more likely to be assaulted through hate crimes. And particularly in times of recession, Asians, like Jews, are often scapegoated, attacked, and killed. The worst part is, of course, it never mattered which particular Asian group was targeted, since all "looked alike."

There is a layer of terror that sits on top of all of us. We never know when the next attack will come. It is this terror that forces us to work like heck and to place so much value on education. It is this same terror that makes us feel like we have to make ourselves invisible, blend in, bleach out or risk getting blamed or killed. Remaining invisible has been a useful survival strategy for us. We are tolerated as long as we grin and bear it and don't make waves.

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Most of us don't even notice on a conscious level that we operate under this terror, partly because the human psyche will not tolerate awareness of so much terror and partly because the oppression is so invisible. It is no wonder that I felt crazy for so long. Because when there is no context, no framework, no language through which to name your experiences, then it makes you think you are crazy, that you are merely making things up in your head and there is something wrong with you personally and not the system.

It also helped me to understand the actual dynamic of how we as people of color were pitted against each other. When racism is framed only in a black-white context, it sets up a hierarchy of oppression that separates people of color and discourages alliances. Because racism is only

recognized in a black-white context, it assumes that black people are the “most” oppressed, thereby discouraging other communities of color from identifying with black people and black people’s struggles with the illusion that this separation would allow other communities of color to escape the oppression of racism. At the same time, our isolation from each other is encouraged and false information about our communities, such as the myth of the model minority, is created to obscure the realities of racism and to further pit one group against another.

When racism is framed only in a black-white context, it also ignores the international dimension of racism rooted in the economic imperialism which exploits Third World countries, peoples, and resources. The United States alone consumes some 40 percent of the world’s resources.

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*The primary goal of the model-minority thesis is to obscure the realities of racism.*

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To reclaim our power, we need to peel away the different layers of oppression, to clearly see and name what the oppression is. We need to be clear about the operations of racism, to understand how it works on each of our communities and on each of us, to keep each of us disempowered and separated.

Racism is an artificial and unnatural construct used to separate and alienate people from one another, to obscure our inherent connectedness. To have our intrinsic human connections obscured and hidden from each other; to become alienated, disconnected, scared, and fearful of each other is a very deep hurt that we as humans have had to suffer. To reclaim our connections is essential to our empowerment.

For most of us, the oppression of racism is often so overt and pervasive that we are able to see it much more clearly and are much more willing to address it. But we are less likely to pay attention to the oppression of being a woman. Often, we see it as a white-woman thing. It does not feel as important to pay attention to our experiences as women. Which is not surprising. Not being important is part of how we are oppressed as women. As young girls, we were not valued, we were not delighted in, or appreciated for our femaleness. In fact, the very opposite was true. Everyone else always comes first before us. Women are considered less smart, less capable, not complete or whole without a man. We are still second-class citizens, still being paid less than men, and women’s issues such as child care, birth control, women’s health care issues, and women’s economic oppression are not given adequate attention and resources.

Until recently, the domestic violence and rape which terrorized half the country’s population was not given the attention it needed, and in most other states around the country, it still isn’t. Anything to do with women, is usually not considered important, is ignored and overlooked, and we women have internalized that message. We are more likely to blow off an engagement with our women friends than with our male friends. Most

of us see our primary relationships as being with men rather than with women. Some women don’t even like other women or trust other women. We have internalized all the outside messages about ourselves and we now play them back at each other.

If we don’t pay specific attention to how we have been hurt as women and work on reclaiming our power and our wholeness as women as well, we won’t get far. We are women. The oppression on us as women is just as pervasive, insidious, and deadly. We are beaten every fifteen seconds, raped every six minutes, and four of us killed are every day.

As the result of our oppression as women, we take care of everyone else; we don’t take charge of our lives; we often wait for someone else to take charge (some of us may still be waiting for the knight in shining armor to come to our rescue, although as women of color, we sort of know that he won’t be coming for us); we do not organize our lives; we follow instead of lead; we do not make time for ourselves; and we give up on ourselves easily.

The heart of any oppression is being forced to be a victim. As women and as women of color we have been victimized over and over. We have been mistreated so many times and in so many ways that we often feel bad about ourselves and powerless over our own lives and relationships, let alone feel as if we can make a difference in the world.

Our empowerment as women and as women of color really means giving up being victims in all areas of our lives. It means fully reclaiming our original human qualities—of inherent beauty, goodness, intelligence, and our inherent interconnectedness to each other. It means taking control of our own lives; of our surroundings; of our relationships with men, women, children; of our personal finances; of our physical and mental health; of our careers; of our sex lives. It means putting our attention on each of these areas and figuring out what we want, and if we do not know clearly what we want—because nobody ever asked us—we get to try several things, explore before we decide what we really want. But whatever we choose to explore, we need to actively take steps toward accomplishing our goals. It means being the actor rather than the one acted upon. It means going for what you want rather than settling for what you can get.

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Our empowerment means taking control of our relationships with men (that’s a whole big topic by itself) and with one another. As women and as women of color, we share a deep sisterhood and natural closeness. This means reaching out instead of waiting for someone to reach for you. It means showing yourself, honestly with

no pretense and inviting another women to do the same. It means making our relationships with each other central and crucial, not secondary. It means not giving up on each other when we get mad or upset at each other. It means that we will look out for each other and will not tolerate the mistreatment of anyone among us. It means we will commit ourselves to standing up for each other. It means we will not allow any one of us to mistreat ourselves or to put ourselves down.

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*To reclaim our power, we need to peel away the different layers of oppression, to clearly see and name what the oppression is.*

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To be fully empowered also means claiming our power in making this world into the kind of place that we want for ourselves and our children—a world where all forms of oppression and all forms of humans harming humans are eliminated. It means we interrupt oppression every time we see it. It means recognizing our significance, knowing that we can make a difference. It means that everything we do and everywhere we are, we see to it that everything goes well, as it should, whether we are the one in charge or not. This is not the same as taking care of other people. We often get confused here. Taking care of others is doing for them what they can do for themselves. Making everything go well means facilitating things in

such a way as to bring out the best of our humanness in every situation.

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It is not easy to give up being victims. The oppressive society is invested in keeping us feeling badly about ourselves, feeling hopeless, powerless and alienated from one another.

But we can no longer settle for what we can get. The reality is we don't have to. We are irresistibly gorgeous and beautiful, incredibly intelligent and we have the power inside us, between us, among us to make the changes that we want to see happen. Yes, we need each other, and we need help to reclaim our power, to go against the lies and the tide of oppression. We can and must help each other, support each other, remind each other of our inherent power and connections. But we cannot reclaim power as a group. It is up to each of us to make up her mind to reclaim her power, to go against those feelings of "I can't" and say instead, "I can and I will."

Rev. Cheng Imm Tan is chairperson of Boston's Asian Task Force Against Domestic Violence.