

Opinion

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Man from Beijing

Susan Squellati Florence
Guest editorial

He is fanning himself, as I sit next to him, on the flight from L.A. to Washington, D.C. It is a simple paper fan, the kind I played with as a child. I wish I had one now. The air is dense on this outdated four-engine DC 8.

The stewardess puts his shiny wooden cane in the overhead compartment. He has gone to sleep, a look of peace on his Asian face. He wears leather sandals, muted green socks, baggy pants and a blue cotton, short-sleeved shirt. On his lap, a small sack purse with a braided strap and tassels on the bottom.

In time, we talk. He is returning to the U.S. after 52 years, for his 55th class reunion from MIT. He has not been back to the United States since 1937. He missed his flight to Boston and has to connect through Washington. He doesn't seem to mind.

He came to the East Coast with his father, as a young boy. His mother stayed in China. His father died and he was raised by his uncle, who was in the laundry business. He received his B.A. and M.S. at MIT and taught aeronautical engineering at the University of Beijing until he retired. As a teacher in China you have to retire at 70 years, if not before.

I feel "chosen" to be sitting next to him. There is something about him that captivates me. It is as if he was plucked from another, less stressful, time. There is something about the natural way he dresses and talks with no pretenses, that impresses me.

He laughs when I ask if he does tai chi. I think all Chinese do these exercises. "No," he smiles, "but it is good if you do, to keep it up always!"

He turns his left ear to me when we talk. I ask about Tiananmen Square as the news reports that tens of thousands of students are demonstrating. He says he doesn't think too much will change in China. He says the students want freedom of the press and a more honest political system. He says the students have been orderly and the government is taking care of them while they are there.

He sleeps again, having traveled for over a day. As the plane begins its descent, we

talk, our faces close so he can hear. His teeth are crooked, his eyes shine with spirit. I tell him how vibrant he is. "I cannot believe you are even 70."

"I'm not. I'm 80 years old," he says smiling.

"Tell me, what is your advice for staying so healthy?"

He is quick to laugh, "Be happy, don't worry and don't be angry. Anger brings on bad health faster than anything."

I ask about religion in China. He says there are many and even though the Communist Party frowns on religions, they don't stop you from going to the temple.

I hesitate but ask this last question, before the wheels touch down, "Are you a Communist?"

I'm relieved when he says, "No, I'm a member of the Democratic Party and the people of all parties have a say in the People's Dialogue."

I take his cane down and feel its smooth, artfully woven, twisted vines. He has an hour before his flight to Boston. It is 8 p.m. Friday, June 2, in Washington. I say goodbye to this remarkable man.

I think of him two days later, as I read, in horror, the headlines of the Washington Post. The world is shocked by China's early morning massacre of students protesting at Tiananmen Square. Instead of going back to the Booksellers Show, I head to the Capitol. Here, I am given a black arm band and watch as demonstrators peacefully protest.

My chance encounter with the professor from Beijing touched me deeply. It made me stop, step out of my routine day and show my compassion for the slain students.

It has been 20 years since Sunday, June 4, 1989. Our world has grown smaller.

We are diverse but can be connected in an instant. It is a necessity for us, like the courageous students in China, to summon our leaders to honest governments. It is a necessity for us to sit and listen to one another. Like passengers on a flight, we can touch each other deeply and help move our world in one direction, to a more compassionate place.

Susan Florence is an author and artist, and has been inspired by life in Ojai for more than 30 years.

thumbs up, down



• Readers send big thumbs-up to the Ojai Valley Garden Club for their outstanding event, "Impressions and Expressions" — beautiful floral designs complementing art. "It was wonderful to see our youth talent too." Another says, "The creativity and generosity of this group of ladies is truly amazing."

• Ojai Valley Girls Softball sends a thumb-up and a thank-you to the Ojai Valley Little League for their time and work on the Montessori fields that are used by both leagues.



• A reader sends a thumbs-up to the Matilija Junior High School Band and String Orchestras A and B for each winning first place at the "Music in the Parks" Festival in Anaheim on May 16 and 17. "And two thumbs-up for the Band and Orchestra A for winning Best Overall with Superior ratings. You all did an amazing job. We are proud of you."

• A reader sends a thumbs-down to all those who did not vote for the parcel tax either time it was offered, and now complain about OUSD's not having money for certain programs for students. "OUSD can't get that money from Sacramento, but the money would have never left Ojai public schools if the parcel tax had passed."

• A reader sends a thumbs-down to the crew that was repaving Signal Street on Thursday, May 21, for not putting up road closed or detour signs and rudely pointed at her and directed her to turn around

• A reader sends a thumbs-down to all the people who use North Montgomery Street as a freeway. "It is a 25 mph zone and the city should lower it to 15 mph. People walk, ride bikes, and small children are on the street all times of the day. Slow down, people, before someone gets hurt, and stop at the stop signs, duh! It can't be that hard to put up a sign, right?"

• A reader sends a thumbs-down to the OUSD assistant superintendent for not taking the time to respond to phone calls, e-mails, etc. so people of the Ojai Valley could use the pool this summer.

This column is meant to provide commentary on a specific act or statement and is not meant to imply blanket support or condemnation. Submit your suggestions by mail, e-mail or fax. Your name and a telephone number must be included for consideration, though they will not be published.

Thumbs may also be submitted on the Internet at thumbs@ojaivalleynews.com

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

trees have dead branches. out. and recines were dis- our tables.