

Liu on Leadership

Judith van Praag

The meeting place is Seattle Central Library's Microsoft Auditorium, the date February 9, 2005. By 7 p.m. about 150 people have gathered on the rafters for a conversation between author Eric Liu and five community leaders and mentors. Behind the table on the stage we see Trish Millines Dziko, founder of Technology Access Foundation; Tom Ikeda, executive director of Densho; Deborah Jacobs, city librarian, Seattle Public Library; Ed Murray, representative, 43rd Legislative District.

"Forget about my book," says Eric Liu, "I wanted to have these people here, leaders, teachers and the general public."

It's hard to forget the book when, to the right of the speaker you see a sales person of Elliot Bay Books, behind piles of Liu's new book "Guiding Lights". It's equally hard to forget the book, when you know that "Guiding Lights" was named The Official Book of National Mentoring Month, sponsored by Harvard Mentoring Project and that this gathering is one of many engagements the author's publicist planned for Liu's promotional book tour. In January alone the author gave twenty-three talks all over the country.

And yet, when Eric Liu repeats his standard two questions, the questions he asked hundreds of mentors over a period of two-and-a-half years, "1: Who influenced you and 2: How do you pass it on?" you're in the moment. You're listening to what these panelists —each a member of a minority group, and a mentor— have to say.

Liu's first book "The Accidental Asian", a compilation of essays, reads like a memoir, a public search of self. And while "Guiding Lights" appears to be about others, this book as well shows how an inquisitive man —a Yale and Harvard educated man, without a clear-cut career prediction— is learning on his feet.

The book tour and its promotional campaign is part of Random House, Liu's publisher's marketing plan, but Liu's personal aim is to

guide people toward a deeper sense of purpose.

The premise of "Guiding Lights" is that every one of us is a teacher and mentor. "People don't get a chance to say those things (about their mentors, or mentoring others)" says Liu. He was surprised to find out how readily the people he encountered wanted to share who had influenced them along the way and also how they passed on the gained knowledge.

A day after the panel discussion Liu will tell me, that in some environments the word "teaching" is a dirty word, because it reminds the people of white colonials "teaching" them. "The whole idea has to be demystified. Promoting a Mentoring Month (last January) had to do with restoration. A few generations ago there wouldn't have been the need (to bring people together in such an organized manner), there was more trust between people. We don't want to go back in time, it's better now for people of color, but with "Guiding Lights" I want to remind people of the roles of people in their life."

Liu, host of "The Power of Voice" on KUOW Public Radio as well as the host of "Seattle Voices", his talk show broadcasted on the Seattle Channel (#21), conducts the simultaneous interview at the auditorium as a grand master overseeing a multiple game of chess. He's in his element, on stage; speaking, asking questions, listening, offering bits of his own story.

In a way "Guiding Lights" IS Eric Liu's story. Bereft of his father when he was still an adolescent, he set out to find mentors as he embarked on the adventure named parenthood. By sharing the report of his quest, he tells his readers about the people who helped him see that the most important part of the voyage is not the destination, but the road we travel.

Some of the stories in "Guiding Lights" are personal. There's Liu's account of returning to the Marine Corps base in Quantico, VA, where he spent two summers during college, at the Officers Candidate School. Notwithstanding the fact that Liu turned down the commission,

"seeing my reflection in dress blue had brought home just how many sides of myself, how many possible lives, I would be foreclosing," he writes in "Accidental Asian", he introduces Sergeant "Gunny" Horton, a "sensitive listener and reader of human beings" as a guiding light. If the Sergeant didn't succeed in making a true Marine out of Eric Liu, he made the younger Liu realize that individuality mattered more to him than the Way of the Corps, or any way laid out for him.

Liu's search is all about transition, having been born running, nary slowing down, he always wanted to know where he's going, and at the end of this book "Guiding Lights" he seems to realize, it's the road less traveled, the detail along the way that matters.

With two icons of the last century gone, talk show host Johnny Carson, and playwright "voice of the people" Arthur Miller, you can't help but wonder what niche this man, who started out at the White House, writing speeches for President Bill Clinton, then serving as deputy domestic policy adviser during Clinton's second term, will fill. Although, given his unique path, he's more likely to come up with a role all of his own making. Who knows, Eric Liu may be the first Ambassador of the Omni cultural States of America.

The interesting thing is that Liu keeps us posted. His writing at times is a hybrid between reporting and story telling. He's an Odysseus who doesn't need Homer; he'll take his own notes. More than that, he's Odysseus with a book deal, knowing ahead of time what to pay attention to, how to package it, and how to send it home.

Next time at the Seattle Central Public Library's Microsoft Auditorium we may find out what's new.

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