

Bonsai Tree*

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*Adapted from “An Open Letter from Otto Fong” (2007)

Preamble

I was researching Asian LGBT issues & coming out stories when I came across Otto Fong and his 2007 blogpost “An Open Letter from Otto Fong” during lockdown in 2020. The letter references coming of age, cultural values, religion, the education system and society with genuine appreciation and a healthy amount of criticism regarding the different perspectives and events specific to Singapore at the time. There was a refreshing honesty and timelessness in Fong’s writing which expressed his lived experiences as a gay man but also managed to address conservative Asian sensibilities. I found the writing was politely provocative with an authoritative, approachable tone not dissimilar to how teachers are like at school. For me, the letter was like a time capsule treasure; a real-life coming-out story aimed at an Asian audience, written by an Asian person? Love, Simon could never.

The following year, I was accepted into an independent performance skills development program aimed at supporting new voices. Our cohort of culturally and linguistically diverse practitioners were encouraged to find a monologue that we wanted to develop as part of our acting repertoire. We could rehearse an existing work, but we also had the possibility to create or adapt something of our own. That was when I decided to reimagine the letter as a short monologue and replicate the same sentiment for a live audience.

Distilling the essence of the work was a challenging but rewarding process removed from the time, place and people involved in the original letter. The adapted monologue begins with the metaphor of a Bonsai tree as something valuable but restrained. It was important for me to retain that imagery, along with Fong’s tactful approach of acknowledging reality before divulging criticism in a disarming way. I imagined the setting as an assembly or meeting where a recently outed member of staff pleads their case to a room of conscious objectors.

Do you know what a bonsai tree is?

It's an imitation of a tree, confined to a small pot. Trimmed and weakened constantly, it looks like a real tree but it's stunted - unable to thrive as it should.

For me, a bonsai tree is the perfect metaphor for a person trapped in the closet.

I've taught my students to empower others; to stand up against injustice, but I'm a hypocrite... In the eight years I've taught, not once did I stand up for my gay students.

When adults like yourselves told homophobic lies to my students under the guise of 'education', I was **furious**, but I kept my mouth shut.

My fear of getting fired for speaking out **forced** me back into the closet, but not today.

When we trim ourselves down like a bonsai tree, we can never grow into our full, authentic selves.

The good book says: "*We must love our neighbours as ourselves.*" It's a simple teaching, but it's not followed by those who seek to oppress others.

The path to enlightenment faces stubborn resistance. In the words of Gandhi, "*First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you...*"

Many people voice reasons to hate homosexuals, just as people have labelled black people as inferior, or women as incapable.

These people go on to claim that the 'gay agenda' will tear apart families and turn everyone gay... But the countries that have legalised gay marriage are more stable than ever. If stability is important, why not recognise that hatred is the real threat to society?

Why am I telling you this? Well, there is immense value in being true to ourselves, so please... don't ask me to be a bonsai tree! I'm not interested. I want to reach my full potential as a human being and I promise to help your children do the same.