



Penn Arts & Sciences
East Asian Languages and Civilizations



賓大中文

Penn Mental Health Wellness 2024 Series: *The Uses of the Blues*

Feb 2024

Sponsored by the Matthew Y Wang Memorial Fund

Alum Speakers



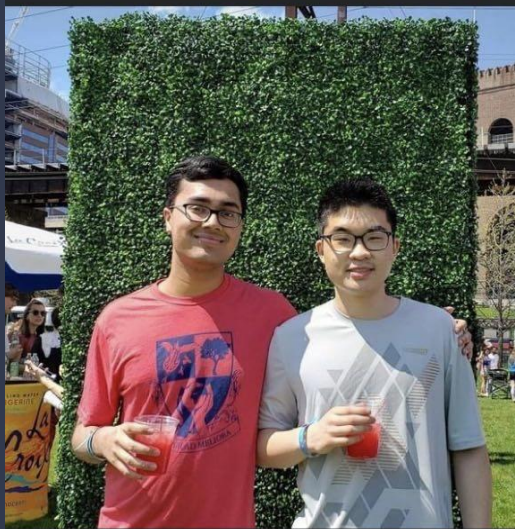
Michelle Lyu Wharton '19



Nuri Yi Penn '27, Cornell '20

Dedicated to Matthew Wang

1999-2021



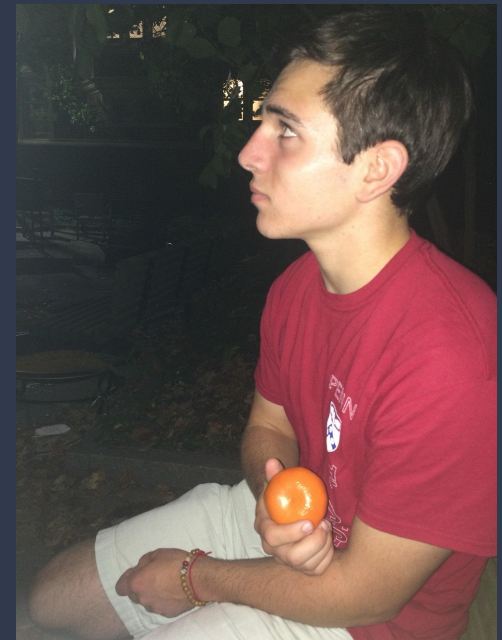
"I want to talk about the blues not only because they speak of this particular experience of life and this state of being, but because they contain the toughness that manages to make this experience articulate... And I want to suggest that the acceptance of this anguish one finds in the blues, and the expression of it, creates also, however odd this may sound, a kind of joy."

Mental Health at Penn

- There is a mental health crisis at Penn – it is a common, seemingly paradoxical experience shared by many students
- We are the students who supposedly “have it all” – talent, prestige, money, success: why isn’t it enough?
- What makes things more difficult is that we aren’t given the language, categories or ideas to address the questions many students grapple with – the root of mental health isn’t just wellness, or stress. It has to do with purpose, identity and freedom.
- The mental health crisis at Penn is an existential question, and it can be explained by understanding the forces that produce this crisis.
- Sharing my story so that it can be used by others, and to be a witness to reality

Freshman Year

- Didn't know what to expect when I got to Penn, but I had high hopes and great dreams
- Freshman year – an exhilarating whirlwind. But for the first time in my life, I started to despair. I felt unsteady, because assumptions I held for a long time were being tested in new ways



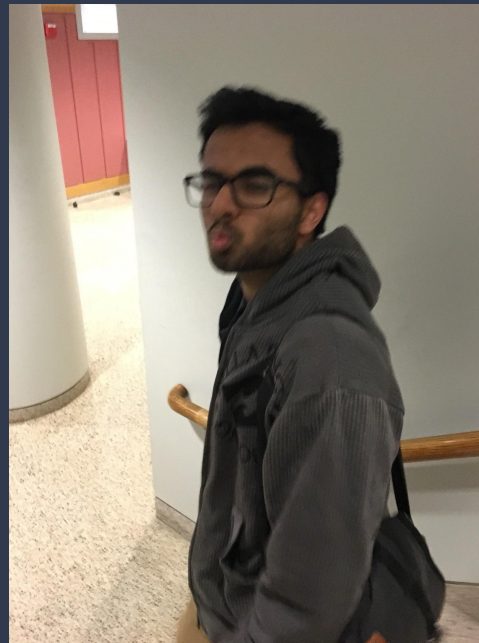


- I'm from the San Gabriel Valley in California – the greatest suburban enclave of Asians in the States; a sweet and sheltered life
- Child of immigrants. Grew up around other high-achieving Asians
- This formed my worldview, and also my moral foundations that I carried with me to Penn



Making the moral choice at Penn

- There were so many great times; yet I knew I was existentially grappling
- Penn was intellectually, socially and morally disappointing and unfulfilling. This came as a great shock and led me to ask new questions – who did I actually want to be? What did I want from life? What's my purpose? I wanted to drive to the heart of these questions.



Existential questions & the moral choice

- Felt depressed and lost, not knowing what my place in the world was
- Started feeling anxious, and getting panic attacks for the first time in my life
- The most important thing for me was to remain honest, and to not give up on searching for the truth that corroborated reality
- I knew other students were feeling the same; for me, the moral choice was having the faith and courage to search
- I trusted my instincts, and that they reflected the reality before me. If I had legitimate reasons to feel as blue as I did, then what did this say about my education at Penn?
- My relationship to my parents was an important touchstone through this process. They loved me so much, yet why weren't they able to help me? Why couldn't they understand what I was experiencing?

“I think I know how many times one has to start again, and how often one feels that one cannot start again. And yet, on pain of death, one can never remain where one is. The light. The light. One will perish without the light...

It is a mighty heritage, it is the human heritage, and it is all there is to trust. And I learned this through descending, as it were, into the eyes of my father and my mother. I wondered, when I was little, how they bore it—for I knew that they had much to bear. It had not yet occurred to me that I also would have much to bear; but they knew it, and the unimaginable rigors of their journey helped them to prepare me for mine. This is why one must say Yes to life and embrace it wherever it is found.”

The Light



Making Sense of Penn

- High pressure, high stakes environment. One of the most elite institutions in the world
- Highly technical education that narrows our capacity as full human beings; a complete education would link our interior lives to American history and the world situation
- Situated in a real city – Philadelphia
- Naturally, students are tasked with making sense of how all of these forces, taken together, shape their lives and decisions
- The need for history – which explained both the assumptions and attitudes I saw at Penn, and clarified what the way out would be
- This journey led me farther than my parents could know or go. It was the process of morally, becoming American

The Blues, Philadelphia & Becoming American

“The blues are rooted in the slave songs; the slaves discovered something genuinely terrible, terrible because it sums up the universal challenge, the universal hope, the universal fear:

*The very time I thought I was lost
My dungeon shook and my chains fell off.*

Philadelphia, its people and its history were my salvation. God brought me to this city for a reason.



“Well, that is almost all I am trying to say. I say it out of great concern. And out of a certain kind of hope. If you can live in the full knowledge that you are going to die, that you are not going to live forever, that if you live with the reality of death, you can live...

...People who in some sense know who they are can't change the world always, but they can do something to make it a little more, to make life a little more human. Human in the best sense. Human in terms of joy, freedom which is always private, respect, respect for one another, even such things as manners. All these things are very important, all these old-fashioned things...”



Change and Freedom – what, and how

- A renewal and transformation of Penn is possible - to fulfill the original and true purpose of education: to know the world, and to live in responsibility to this knowledge
- Letting go of safety (all the things that were supposed to make me happy, but didn't), in order to live
- New standards – this is the difficult choice, but it is the only choice that creates the freedom we all deserve. Freedom to become ourselves and to lead purposeful lives
- You're not alone - I, history and the people of the city are your witnesses

Working things out together

- Now is the time to ask and answer these universal questions, privately and with others
- Being a human being is not all easy or feel-good, but humanity is precious



The moral choice

- Growing up means having independence to make your own decisions
- This can feel paralyzing, but is exactly what makes freedom possible
- Not all choices are equally important
- Some decisions determine the course and quality of your life — these are worth taking the time and energy to think through and make right

“The purpose of education is precisely this — that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not.

To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity.”

– James Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers” (1963)

Identity

- With agency comes responsibility: to live with yourself and the consequences of your actions, because they're your own
- But you can only take responsibility for your actions if you know and accept who you are, and learn to trust yourself (letting go of blame)
- Might mean working through different group labels, but ultimately there is a need to achieve an individual identity reflecting your private life
 - Authority comes from that private, personal integrity

“History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to be read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations.

And it is with great pain and terror that one begins to realize this. In great pain and terror one begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is, and formed one's point of view. **In great pain and terror because, thereafter, one enters into battle with that historical creation, oneself, and attempts to recreate oneself according to a principle more humane and liberating — one begins the attempt to achieve a level of personal maturity and freedom which robs history of its tyrannical power, and also changes history.”**
– James Baldwin, “The White Man's Guilt”

History

- As individuals, we've each been produced by history
- History ties us to our common human inheritance
- For Asian Americans in particular, we are tasked with understanding our Asian heritage and accepting our future as part of the American people
 - But for all Americans, history resonates

For Matthew Wang
Your light still shines
(above us every day)



Questions

Share your feedback on today's lecture

*It will help us tailor future events to be more
relevant and helpful! (:*



Resources

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES

[Asian Mental Health Collective](#) ← AAPI

[Wellness At Penn Instagram](#) ← Penn

[CAPS Tips & Tools](#) ← Penn

[Mental Health Resource Center](#)

[Self-care Assessment](#)

[Self-care Ideas](#)

[Identifying Lifestyle Behaviours](#)

[Determining your personal values](#)

[Identifying Stress, Distress, Crisis](#)

[Emergency Self-Care Worksheet](#)

PENN SUPPORT NETWORK

- PAACH + Community Houses
- Academic Advisors + Teachers
- RAs & GAs
- Older Mentors in clubs and classes
- Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)

CAMPUS RESOURCES

The HELP Line: 215-898-HELP

Counseling and Psychological Services: 215-898-7021

Student Health Service: 215-746-3535

*Office of the Vice Provost for University Life:
215-898-6081*

University Chaplain's Office: 215-898-8456

Reach-A-Peer Helpline:

- 215-573-2727 (every day from 9 p.m. to 1 a.m.)
- 215-515-7332 (texting service available 24/7)

Penn AAPI Alumni Mentorship Program

*A collective of Penn Alumni committed
to increasing open dialogue around
mental health in the AAPI community*



↑ Interested in being a mentee? ↑

*Scan the code above & we'll reach
out with more info via email*