Oral History Center
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

Rev. Michael Yoshii

Rev. Michael Yoshii: Faith in the Face of Injustice

Japanese American Intergenerational Narratives Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Roger Eardley-Pryor
in 2022

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Michael Yoshii upon acceptance of a National Education Association (NEA) Ellison S. Onizuka Memorial Award for Human Rights in Washington, DC, 2004.

Abstract

Michael Yoshii is a retired pastor in the California Nevada Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church who was ordained in the United Methodist Church in 1986 and served local congregations as well as the larger Church in social justice activism and ministries of healing and reconciliation. Yoshii was born in August 1952, in Berkeley, California, and is Sansei. He attended El Cerrito High School from 1967 to 1970, and graduated in 1974 from UC Berkeley, where he majored in Social Welfare and was introduced to Asian American Studies. Yoshii's parents, grandparents, and other relatives were incarcerated without due process by the US government in detention camps at Topaz, Utah, and at Jerome, Arkansas during World War II. In the early 1980s, Yoshii volunteered with the National Coalition for Redress and Reparations (NCRR) providing outreach to churches for participation in the federal redress hearings in San Francisco. He also testified at the hearings in August 1981 on the spiritual impacts of mass incarceration for the Japanese American community. Yoshii began seminary in 1983 at the Pacific School of Religion and earned his Master of Divinity in 1986. He was ordained in 1986 and appointed to a dual assignment with the Berkeley Methodist United Church and the Buena Vista United Methodist Church. In 1988, he was appointed full time as pastor to the Buena Vista United Methodist Church in Alameda, where he served until his retirement in 2020. Yoshii's decades of Christian ministry and social activism included co-creating the Sansei Legacy Project to explore family legacies of incarceration with fellow Sansei, as well as numerous local organizing projects, including addressing a local police racial crisis, responding to lack of Asian representation in schools and government, and providing a voice for LGBTQ+ community members. His ministry also included work for global human rights in the Philippines and an interfaith partnership with the Palestinian Muslim village of Wadi Foquin. Yoshii and his wife Suzanne have two daughters and four grandchildren. In this oral history, Yoshii discusses the multifaceted legacies of his family's experiences before, during, and after their wartime incarcerations, especially as they relate to his own life and spiritual journey.

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Project History

After the entrance of the United States into World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, which mandated the forced removal of Japanese Americans from their homes on the West Coast into incarceration camps inland for the duration of the war. This unjust incarceration uprooted families, disrupted businesses, and dispersed communities—impacting generations of Japanese Americans.

The Japanese American Intergenerational Narratives Oral History Project documents and disseminates the ways in which intergenerational trauma and healing occurred after the United States government's incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. These interviews examine and compare how private memory, creative expression, place, and public interpretation intersect at sites of incarceration.

Initial interviews in this project focus on the Manzanar and Topaz prison camps in California and Utah, respectively, and pose a comparison through the lens of place, popular culture, and collective memory. How does memory graft differently on different sites? What gets remembered about these sites, and by whom? How does memory differ across generations? Has interpretive work around these sites provided intergenerational catharsis for families of those incarcerated? Does geography and popular culture matter in the healing process?

Exploring narratives of healing as a through line, these interviews of descendants of World War II incarceration investigate the impact of different types of healing, how this informs collective memory, and how these narratives change across generations.

This oral history project began in 2021 with generous funding from the National Park Service's Japanese American Confinement Sites Grant. Most of the early interviews were conducted remotely via Zoom due to the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Interview 1: July 15, 2022

01-00:00:00
Eardley-Pryor: Today is Friday, July 15, 2022. My name is Roger Eardley-Pryor from the Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library at the University of California Berkeley. This is interview session number one with Michael Yoshii as a part of the Japanese American Intergenerational Narratives Oral History Project. Michael, it's great to see you. Thank you so much for making time to share your stories today. To start off, could you share your full name, the date of your birth, and its location as well?

01-00:00:32
Yoshii: Sure. Good morning. My name is Michael Arthur Yoshii. I was born on August 10, 1952 in Berkeley, California.

01-00:00:39
Eardley-Pryor: All right. Before we dive into stories about family background and your own journeys through life, I want to make sure that we talk about terminology with regard to what happened to your family in the context of Japanese American Intergenerational Narratives. For your parents and grandparents, what terminology do you use to describe what happened to them during World War II?

01-00:01:02
Yoshii: I would say I use the term mass incarceration for the collective experience that Japanese Americans went through, and the location was detention camps. In the case of my family, at Topaz, Utah, and Jerome, Arkansas.

01-00:01:19
Eardley-Pryor: What terminology did you hear growing up?

01-00:01:21
Yoshii: I didn't hear much growing up. Probably that'll be something we talk about today. But I think probably internment camps was probably the phrase that I may have heard from about junior high.

01-00:01:37
Eardley-Pryor: Okay. What terminology did your family use?

01-00:01:40
Yoshii: I don't recall them having any terminology, to tell you the truth.

01-00:01:47
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. And when was it around, and maybe why, did the transition for your use of mass incarceration and detention camps come into play?

01-00:01:55
Yoshii: I think it's come within the last decade or so, as we look at the phenomenon of incarceration in this country and the fact that there's collective experiences that different communities have. And this was one particular and peculiar to

Japanese Americans. So the phrase mass incarceration, I think, really, really helps describe what happened. And also the language of detention center also is what is happening. People were being detained without their rights being consulted, against their will.

01-00:02:32
Eardley-Pryor: Thank you. To dive into your personal experience, let's step back and go over some of your family background. Can you share a little bit about your mother and father, what their names are, maybe even their birthdates if you know them?

01-00:02:46
Yoshii: Yeah. So my father's name is Tadashi Yoshii, and he was born on July 28, 1921. He's now a hundred years old. He'll be 101 this month.

01-00:03:00
Eardley-Pryor: Wow.

01-00:03:00
Yoshii: And he's still alive and kicking. He was born and raised in Oakland, California, went to public schools there. My mom's name was Ely, Lily Sakamoto and she was born on January 9, 1922. She passed away in 2017. She grew up on a farm in Fresno. I think she was in Sacramento first, and then Fresno before the wartime.

01-00:03:31
Eardley-Pryor: And we'll soon get into the story of your family and your arrival into the world. Do you have any other siblings that Tadashi and Lily had?

01-00:03:42
Yoshii: Yeah. I have two siblings, one older brother Ken who is four years older than me. He was born in 1948, and he has three kids. My two nephews and niece are Jim, Steve and Ally. And then I have a younger sister who's seven years younger than me, who was born on Halloween 1959. I still remember that. And she was married to Jaime, my brother-in-law. They have two kids, Jared and Jason.

01-00:04:15
Eardley-Pryor: And what's your sister's name?

01-00:04:18
Yoshii: My sister's name is Judy.

01-00:04:20
Eardley-Pryor: Ah, that's my mother's name.

01-00:04:21
Yoshii: Judy Fukumae. I didn't mention, too, my brother Ken's wife Carolyn passed away at an early age and he had a second wife named Yuko, who also passed away.

01-00:04:35
Eardley-Pryor: Oh, okay. Let's discuss your grandparents, and maybe begin with your maternal grandparents. Before we dive into the stories about who they are, can you share a little bit about the Zoom background that you've selected?

01-00:04:50
Yoshii: Sure. This Zoom background is something I created during the [COVID-19] pandemic, and it's taken at the Sunset Mortuary in El Cerrito, where both sets of grandparents are buried and where my mother's also buried. And so oftentimes, I'll take my father up there to say hello to my grandparents and my mom. And this photo was taken on one day where there was a nice sunset. And so I like to use this photo backdrop to bring my grandparents into every meeting that I'm in on Zoom where I can, just to invoke their presence as ancestors, and also for my mom, as well.

01-00:05:27
Eardley-Pryor: That couldn't be more perfect for an intergenerational narrative discussion. Well, let's begin, perhaps, with your maternal grandparents, with Lily's parents. You mentioned that she grew up on a farm in Sacramento and then in Fresno.

01-00:05:42
Yoshii: Right.

01-00:05:43
Eardley-Pryor: Can you tell us share some stories about her parents, and how they came to the United States?

01-00:05:49
Yoshii: Sure. So my grandfather on my mom's side, his name was Kamezuchi Sakamoto. He was born in 1988—I mean 1888, excuse me—and passed away in 1973. His wife Yukiko was a picture bride. I don't know exactly the date she came into the country, but she was born in 1899, a little bit younger than him, and then she passed away in 1985. Interestingly enough, she passed away on Pearl Harbor day, December 7th. I didn't realize that until later, later on, after she had passed. But anyway, they had a farm in Sacramento for a time, and then the bulk of the time, I think, when my mom's siblings and her were growing up was in Fresno. Had a farm there. And then they were incarcerated at the Fresno Assembly Center first and then sent to Jerome, Arkansas as a family. I think that was the site of the detention camp for most of the folks in that particular region. So they were there during the duration of the war.

01-00:07:02
Eardley-Pryor: What kind of stuff were they farming in the Central Valley before the war began, before World War II?

01-00:07:09
Yoshii: I don't really know. I don't really know what their produce was. I know that he went off to market, and I'll share a story about that later on. Also, I should

mention that my mom had three siblings. Henry was the oldest brother, Hisayo and then Marian were her two sisters.

01-00:07:28
Eardley-Pryor: You mentioned that your mother and parents were forced to go to Jerome camp. Were her siblings there with her, all together?

01-00:07:37
Yoshii: Yeah, they all went together.

01-00:07:41
Eardley-Pryor: Okay. We'll pick up that story, probably more wartime stories and what happened with your mother, especially as she came out of that experience and then came to meet your father, and his trajectory. But maybe just step back into your father's background. Can you share a little bit about your paternal grandparents?

01-00:08:01
Yoshii: Yeah. So my father's father's name was Seisuke Yoshii. He was born in 1882 and passed away in 1958. He first went to Hawaii from Japan. I think he was working on sugar cane plantations, and then he made his way to California. My understanding was that he was here in 1906 because he experienced the earthquake. It's the story that my father and uncle had told me about. So he ended up, I think, in the East Bay. His wife, Misao Yoshii was a picture bride. She was born in 1897 and passed away in 1992. Over time, what they were able to do was open up a restaurant in West Oakland, which is now the corner of West Grand and San Pablo in West Oakland. And he had worked for the folks who ran the restaurant. They decided to go back to Japan, and so he was able to purchase it from them, and then that was kind of the family business. Kind of an, I don't know, nickel, dime, quarter café of sorts. I'm told they had really good meals for twenty-five cents that included soup and dessert.

01-00:09:19
Eardley-Pryor: That's a great deal.

01-00:09:24
Yoshii: Yeah. And then they lived in the back of the restaurant. So there was like a back unit. It was like a one-room place where my father and his brother and parents lived.

01-00:09:35
Eardley-Pryor: That's where your dad grew up? In the back of the restaurant?

01-00:09:37
Yoshii: Right. I don't know if I mentioned this. So, he had an older brother Kiyoshi who was three years older than him. So the two of them, and then my grandparents.

01-00:09:49
Eardley-Pryor: And it sounds like your grandfather, Seisuke, when he got to California, began working for a Japanese family, a Japanese business. And that's how he then purchased the restaurant from them?

01-00:10:01
Yoshii: Yeah. I think he bounced around with different jobs and then he landed in this restaurant. What my dad tells me is that he [my grandfather] learned the trade from them. He really observed what they were doing. So he learned how to run a restaurant and cook, as well. They cooked kind of, what you call it, sort of just classic American fare. Breakfast, lunches, dinners, stews and steaks. Different things like that

01-00:10:31
Eardley-Pryor: You mentioned that both of your maternal and paternal grandmothers were picture brides, which was really common at that time and generation. For both of your grandfathers, do you know what was the impetus for them to leave Japan, to go to, in your paternal grandfather's case, to Hawaii first, but both of them eventually coming to California? Do you know why it was they went?

01-00:10:55
Yoshii: Well, I think for both it was economic. Some opportunity to make money. By the way, they were both from Yamaguchi prefecture in Japan. And so the Sakamoto side, came from a farming background. But I don't really know all the details, like family dynamics. Because I know with many other families, there are like intricacies about why an individual might want to leave, because they're leaving the family, too, right? So I don't know on either side any more details about the personal causes or maybe personality things that went into it.

01-00:11:40
Eardley-Pryor: For what the family dynamics were that—

01-00:11:43
Yoshii: Yeah. And I have never met their parents or their family. My father and mother have been back to Yamaguchi to meet some relatives still on the Sakamoto side, but I haven't had the chance to do that.

01-00:11:56
Eardley-Pryor: And that Yamaguchi prefecture is in very far southwestern Japan, even south of Hiroshima. Mostly, like you said, country. A rural area.

01-00:12:07
Yoshii: Yeah, yeah. So we've kind of come to understand that they both had that sort of Japanese country background, as opposed to sort of the urban Tokyo immigrant.

01-00:12:20
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Maybe to tell a few stories about World War II, or just before. For your paternal grandparents, especially for Seisuke's work in the restaurant, I imagine that his wife helped support that work, and they raised

their family there. What happened with them during the ramp up to World War II, and eventually the 1942 civilian exclusion orders that forced all the Japanese Americans on the West Coast into these camps?

01-00:12:52
Yoshii: Yeah. Some stories that I've heard from my family, particularly my uncle and my father, is that I don't think my grandfather who ran the restaurant in Oakland, I don't think he thought this was going to happen. He thought there wouldn't be a war. So he wasn't preparing for that, in any stretch of the imagination. So I think when things came, it was kind of a shock for them. And then they did what they had to do and prepared. My father's brother entered into the 442nd [Regimental Combat Team] before the war—oh, he entered into the military, excuse me, before the war started. He was part of the draft. He was part of—

01-00:13:35
Eardley-Pryor: His brother Kiyoshi?

01-00:13:37
Yoshii: Kiyoshi, yeah. He was part of the draft, and he entered into the military. So he was already part of the military when the war broke out. And then he got assigned to the 442nd in the process of it. My father and my grandparents, his parents, went to Tanforan initially. I don't know exactly how many months they were there. They were there prior to going to Topaz.

01-00:14:09
Eardley-Pryor: In your father's story, his older brother was drafted and then serves in this famed military unit of Japanese Americans, the 442nd. Your father was probably in his, like, early twenties when he and his parents were shipped to Topaz?

01-00:14:29
Yoshii: Yeah. He would have been twenty-one, I guess.

01-00:14:32
Eardley-Pryor: Okay. Was there any consideration of him entering the draft like his brother? Or was it that he was there to take care of the parents?

01-00:14:43
Yoshii: He did enter into the military, not the 442nd, but he entered into it later, after he was in Topaz. And he hasn't really talked much about that decision, except that it was kind of his way of also contributing and serving as his brother did. His brother was wounded in the war in Europe and had his arm blown off. And he kind of had to go to a hospital and then do some recovery. He got a prosthetic arm put on. So that was like a lifelong injury from the war. And my grandparents were really upset about that. I think he was able to come back and visit them in Topaz on one of his return trips. I don't know the exact sequence when my father entered into the military himself, but yeah.

01-00:15:41
Eardley-Pryor: Wow. I'm trying to imagine your uncle's experience of training and serving, of getting ready to go serve in Europe, and then coming to visit his family in this prison camp in the middle of Utah, and what that was like for all of them.

01-00:15:59
Yoshii: Yeah. I think it was pretty emotional for all of them. So as I mentioned, my father went with his parents to Topaz. It seems like they kind of got settled in there. My father was able to get released to look for work. I know he went to Wisconsin among other places and a couple other states looking for work during the war. He went with two other friends, I think, and they couldn't find work for all of them. I think one of them could find a job, but then they couldn't all get jobs and they wanted to stay together. I think they came back to Utah and did some work around the Ogden area. And then he went into the military. So he was in the military when the war ended. My understanding is that my uncle brought my grandparents back to California when the war ended and the camps were closed. He was the one that drove them back. And my father had to meet them as he was discharged from the military. And then they came back to California and there were housing projects for Japanese Americans in Richmond, California and that's where they regathered as a family. And that also, by the way, was where my mother's family was, as well. They had reentered California from Arkansas and then my mother came. I don't know if they came all together. I don't know what the sequence was but she ended up in the Richmond Housing Projects, too. My dad tells the story that he remembers people were going to introduce him to my mom because she was coming—I think she was coming from Chicago, if I'm not mistaken. And so there were some matchmakers that connected them when she came to Richmond.

01-00:18:01
Eardley-Pryor: Sounds like a good setup, looking out for each other that way.

01-00:18:04
Yoshii: Yeah.

01-00:18:05
Eardley-Pryor: I'm curious as to how both these families ended up at these projects, the housing projects in Richmond. For the paternal side, what happened with the restaurant?

01-00:18:17
Yoshii: Well, the restaurant was lost. They had to close that up. So that was lost to them. I think that was quite a blow to my grandfather because he had worked so hard to learn the business and then be able to take it over. I don't know if it was thriving but it was a good business for him. I can tell from my father's stories that they really enjoyed it. They really liked doing that. In my father's later years he talked often about the restaurant. I see him at least once a week and he often reminiscences about the restaurant and what it was like growing up in that neighborhood and people all got along. The neighboring businesses

were really good to each other. The owners of different businesses kind of would come to the bar in the afternoon and have drinks together. So they had some sense of kind of business camaraderie I think in the neighborhood. There is kind of that revisiting that I hear my father making when we talk about things today. That was one highlight for him. And he worked in the restaurant, too. He really enjoyed helping do prep work for vegetables and for different dishes. He remembers helping make soups and helping make the coleslaw, things like that. And I think that just piecing it together, because I really didn't know my grandfather that well because he died when I was only six years old, that he had poured a lot of his life into that restaurant. And when they came back, I think my dad said they went back to try to see what they could do there but there was no chance for them to reopen it up.

01-00:20:08
Eardley-Pryor: And on your mother's family side, the maternal side, those grandparents, when they were farming in Fresno and then shipped to the detention camps in Arkansas and then made their way back to California, how was it that they ended up in the Bay Area in Richmond?

01-00:20:27
Yoshii: I don't really know about what the story is in terms of people from Arkansas coming to Richmond. Just where they ended up coming back to.

01-00:20:41
Eardley-Pryor: You had mentioned there was some sort of travel from Chicago, you thought?

01-00:20:45
Yoshii: Well, my mom and her sisters ended up leaving Jerome to Chicago. And I don't know exactly what year during camp. My grandparents never left there but my mom and her two sisters were able to leave and get out to Chicago where they were able to look for work also and then kind of have some social life there. So I think that's where they were when the war ended and then they had to come back. I don't know who it was that brought my grandparents back to California. It may have been my uncle. He may have stayed there. But I don't know the details about that.

01-00:21:25
Eardley-Pryor: Immediately after the war, both of what became your maternal and paternal families, both were in these housing projects at Richmond that the federal government created?

01-00:21:35
Yoshii: Correct. Correct, correct. So this was specially designated for Japanese American returnees.

01-00:21:42
Eardley-Pryor: Oh, interesting. I wonder if there's some relationship between the Kaiser shipping yards that were in that area, and all the housing that was for the laborers there.

01-00:21:52
Yoshii: Yeah. There is an historic display of the wartime housing, and I was asking them if they could do some research on the Japanese American housing, as well. Because there's a display called Rosie the Riveter in Richmond, California. They have an exhibit up there about the activities of the wartime, and also the southern migrants, particularly the Black community that came into the war industries in California, and then there were housing projects that were set up to accommodate the migrants. But there's no documentation of the housing for the Japanese Americans. It would be interesting to find that out and see kind of the duration of the housing. I've taken my dad back there to kind of drive around to see if he remembers exactly where the houses were, and we couldn't identify explicitly. Just kind of the general neighborhood, but not the specific houses themselves. So I assume that they were there, and then at some point they were gone.

01-00:23:00
Eardley-Pryor: What was the trajectory for your parents? You said that they were set up on a date by mutual friends who knew that your mother was coming to Richmond, and your father and his family were already there. Can you tell me a little bit about their connection, and how that grew?

01-00:23:15
Yoshii: So I think there was a common friend or another family that knew both of them. And so I think their friend was the one that said, "I want to introduce you to this girl who's going to be coming out of here." So the story is they went ice skating, something like that, and started dating.

01-00:23:36
Eardley-Pryor: That's a great first date, especially if nobody knows how to skate. They can hold on to each other. How is it that you learned these family stories? How is it that such storytelling and this family history came to you?

01-00:23:54
Yoshii: In terms of the wartime?

01-00:23:55
Eardley-Pryor: Any of it. I mean, how is it that you learned your family ancestry and these stories that you're sharing with me?

01-00:24:01
Yoshii: I think probably just piecemeal over time. It wasn't much of a storytelling family. I know that there are families within their own sort of culture of their family dynamics, they're telling stories all the time. But that wasn't the case for us per se. And there was always something going on in the family, too. And I kind of conjectured that, perhaps. There were always things that were going on. People were really busy trying to take care of things, and so there wasn't a whole lot of time sitting talk story.

01-00:24:35
Eardley-Pryor: That term "talk story" rings a bell for me. That was something in the Hawaiian pigeon language that Japanese Americans in Hawaii often would say—to "talk story."

01-00:24:45
Yoshii: Yes.

01-00:24:46
Eardley-Pryor: As in "Let's just connect and talk story." Is that something that passed down through perhaps your paternal grandfather, who spent time in the Hawaiian cane fields?

01-00:24:55
Yoshii: No, I don't think so. I don't think so. Again, my grandfather passed away when I was six years old, so I never had the chance to like sit at his feet and hear him tell stories. I don't even remember much conversations with him at all. And my grandmother was very private in some sense. She was very quiet. [Much later in life I would come to appreciate the humorous and gregarious side of her personality.] And there were stories around—I began to understand why later on—about her quite demeanor with things.

My mother's side of the family, though, there was a little bit more going on for stories to be shared. Because their home was a hub of activity for the Sakamoto family. And so my mom had the three siblings. They all had their families. And we'd have family gatherings. People would come over. It'd be more like my oldest cousin would be telling stories about my grandfather, or he'd be asking questions about different things. As the oldest grandson, he had more opportunity to interact with, my grandfather. And I know he interacted a lot with my father, too. So I think there were more stories that my father told him than he probably told us, because my cousin would ask. Whereas I don't think me and my brother would ask in the same way, or it's not the same dynamic.

01-00:26:22
Eardley-Pryor: It strikes me as interesting that you became such a storyteller in your work as a pastor eventually, in sharing stories to help lift up your congregation and to teach lessons, especially from the Bible, and just from life. Yet, the family dynamic that you grew up in was not much of a storytelling family.

01-00:26:40
Yoshii: Well, when I think about it though, my father was a storyteller. When I think about it in those terms, that I've become a storyteller, he also was a storyteller. The kinds of stories, the things that he would talk about, to me, they tended to be stories with other people in our family, not with us as the kids.

01-00:27:04
Eardley-Pryor: You'd mentioned that there were a lot of things going on in your family's life, and you also mentioned that your grandfather, your paternal grandfather

passed away when you were six years old. What memory do you have of that passing?

01-00:27:15
Yoshii: Well, the memory I have is not the direct one, but it came from my cousin who is the same age as me. Because she remembered the year in which he passed away and the circumstances, because they were then living in Hayward. We were in Berkeley. And she remembered the commotion that was going on, and her dad having to come to Richmond. My grandparents lived in Richmond. We lived in Berkeley. My cousins lived in Hayward. And there was a lot of commotion going on and then his passing kind of was a shock, because it just kind of took place really suddenly. But I don't remember much about it because my dad was always over at their house anyway. So it wasn't like he left all of a sudden to go over there. I think, as my father retells the story, he was staying overnight there that night for some reason, and then his father rolled over in the bed and had a heart attack and he died. And I think my father didn't come back and tell us. I don't remember him coming back and telling us anything. Maybe he came back and talked to my mom. And maybe we were shielded as kids. I don't know.

But what had also happened was not long after my grandfather passed away, my grandmother tried to commit suicide. And I didn't know it at the time. I only found out later in my adult life that this is what happened. And so my dad had to kind of go into this very stressful mode of keeping an eye on my grandmother and spending a lot of time over there. On the other hand, for my cousin, I think in her family situation, she was witnessing her dad having to take trips from Hayward to Richmond. For me, it was like that was already my dad's routine. He was always over there. But he never told us what happened in terms of her trying to take her life. So what that helped me understand later in my life was that there was a family crisis that took place when I was about six years old, and that required my dad's attention over at my grandmother's place quite a bit. And he was working out in Richmond at the time, and so he would often go there during lunch. I think he would go there and bring her lunch, and then check up on her. And then afterwards, he would go over and check up on her again. He'd often call back home, and we were eating dinner at home. I remember my mom getting a phone call during dinner time and they talked for a couple minutes. But I didn't think much of it except that he was working hard, and he was over at his mother's place. But I didn't know the details of the story until much later.

01-00:30:14
Eardley-Pryor: And that maternal grandmother, who you mentioned tried to commit suicide when her husband passed away in the late fifties—from what you said, she lived like another forty years past that?

01-00:30:27
Yoshii: Yeah, yeah.

01-00:30:30
Eardley-Pryor: Wow, wow. I'm curious about language. Did your grandmother speak English?

01-00:30:40
Yoshii: Yeah, she spoke English. And she was pretty good at it, too. I mean, it was broken English, but she could get by in conversations. And my dad would say that, like in the restaurant for example, she spoke good enough English that she could be a hostess as people came in and kind of have these conversations with customers, and people really liked her. She was really good in terms of connecting with people. I don't know about my grandfather's English. I think he also spoke English. My dad tells a story that my grandmother used to read the newspaper to my grandfather in English because that was a way for her to practice her English and also inform him of the news that was going on.

01-00:31:24
Eardley-Pryor: What about your maternal family, the ones that had immigrated to the United States. Were they also fluent in English?

01-00:31:35
Yoshii: My grandfather's English was not as fluent, although he spoke English. And my grandmother's was not totally fluent, although she—like when I communicated with her, it was really—how should I say? You know what she's saying, but she's not being totally clear in English. Somebody else might not understand what she's saying. I think that's a common phenomenon for those of us who have family members who are primarily monolingual, that we understand their English, but others don't.

01-00:32:13
Eardley-Pryor: And for you, what was the language that you grew up speaking at home?

01-00:32:16
Yoshii: English. We spoke very little Japanese. My parents were conversant in both Japanese and English but not fluent. They didn't speak Japanese at home, but at family gatherings they would be speaking Japanese to the grandparents. Sometimes it would be kind of a hybrid, Japanese and English. But they were able to converse in Japanese with them. But also, they didn't teach us Japanese at home.

01-00:32:44
Eardley-Pryor: Why do you think that was?

01-00:32:46
Yoshii: I think it was a combination of a couple of things. One, convenience. It was just kind of hard to do that. And two—you notice like my name is Michael Arthur Yoshii. A lot of my friends had Japanese middle names. My parents kind of didn't give us Japanese middle names on purpose, and I think that was to not make us stand out and not draw attention to being Japanese per se. I think that kind of was the explanation. When I first asked a question like, "Where's my Japanese middle name?" and they said, "Well, we thought it

wouldn't be a good thing if we—." Plus, I was also named after a baseball player, a minor league player in the Pacific Coast League in Oakland, or something like that.

01-00:33:33
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. In the context of learning family history and sharing stories, I'm curious about whether your grandparents' mixed English and Japanese was a hindrance for you to connect with them and hear these stories, since you didn't grow up speaking Japanese.

01-00:33:53
Yoshii: Well, I think in retrospect, if we knew Japanese our connection would have been much stronger. That's for sure. But I think our connection, it is what it is—or, it was what it was. And I think my grandmother on my dad's side eventually came to live with them in El Cerrito, so I used to come and see her and visit her there, and she was quite a character. Even though she had limited English, she had quite a sense of humor and she loved to joke around and stuff. Later, when I was a minister, I'd come into the bedroom where she was laying in bed, and she'd tell me, "Oh, it's the preacher boy. Are you going to come preach to me today? Are you going to come and tell me something?" But she just had this great sense of humor about things. I just remember those times when she was there at the home. It was a nice thing, I think, for my dad. And now, I can understand in retrospect why it was so important for her to come live with them. She'd be right there in the same household.

01-00:35:11
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. I can imagine.

01-00:35:11
Yoshii: But I think that was long after the crisis had taken place. Many years after.

01-00:35:19
Eardley-Pryor: I'm sure that the memory of that crisis—of having lost his father, being there in the house when it happened, and then having nearly lost his mother—that it would leave an impression of wanting to make sure you're taking care of your mother.

01-00:35:30
Yoshii: Yeah, absolutely.

01-00:35:33
Eardley-Pryor: Do you mind if we pause for a moment?

01-00:35:34
Yoshii: Yeah.

[pause in recording]

01-00:35:34
Eardley-Pryor: Great. Thank you for sharing some of these family stories here, Michael. I'm curious about your own experience. So you were born in the early 1950s, and your parents, you said, moved to Berkeley. How was it that they made this transition from living in Richmond to their home in Berkeley?

01-00:35:56
Yoshii: Well, my mother's parents, my Sakamoto grandparents, bought a home in Berkeley on Channing Way. And I think it was my Uncle Henry who was also with them, and somehow they purchased the home. So they were already there, is my understanding, and then my parents were able to buy a home across the street from them. I don't know exactly when they moved there. It could have been in '48 when they got married. But they were there when I was born in '52. So I think it was from about '48 on, 1948 on, that they established a home there. And he was able to get a GI loan to be able to purchase the home.

01-00:36:42
Eardley-Pryor: Oh, that's great. What was it that your father's service entailed? Does he ever speak about it?

01-00:36:47
Yoshii: He was a courier in France, between France and Belgium. So he would talk about riding a train to bring communication information to different people, back and forth. He said it was an interesting job. He said it was pretty routine. and not much else that he talked about there.

01-00:37:16
Eardley-Pryor: So he was able to secure a GI loan. My understanding of Berkeley at that time was there was still very strict redlining as to—

01-00:37:24
Yoshii: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah.

01-00:37:27
Eardley-Pryor: Did that shape where your grandparents, and eventually your parents, could live?

01-00:37:31
Yoshii: I never thought about it but, I mean, that's obvious that there's certain places they couldn't live. Later on, I got involved in housing advocacy work and kind of understood the whole history of housing discrimination. We know in Berkeley—in every city in the East Bay area—had their own redlining going on. And I've never talked with them about the circumstances under which they were looking for homes and why Berkeley versus other places. My uncle moved from Richmond to Hayward. They bought a place in Hayward. And I've never had the conversation with them about why they chose Hayward versus Berkeley and so forth.

01-00:38:14
Eardley-Pryor: What was it that people did for work in the wake of the war?

01-00:38:20
Yoshii: After the war?

01-00:38:20
Eardley-Pryor: Yes.

01-00:36:20
Yoshii: My father got a job. It was kind of government connected. It was like an office job over in San Francisco, and he said that a couple of his friends in the Richmond—I think it was in the Richmond projects, they commuted together and I think he drove. But he didn't like it. So he didn't stay with that. And he ended up getting into the produce industry. He said he liked working with his hands and kind of moving around and stuff. And so the produce industry was very important because farmers were connected to the produce industry. There were Japanese Americans within the produce industry in the East Bay, and so people—of course, there was still anti-Japanese sentiment after the war, and so it wasn't that easy to find jobs for people, and you had to find jobs where people had relationships. And so he gravitated to the produce industry. My uncle said he got a job at the Naval Air Station in Alameda, and then later with the post office. I believe he worked for many years. And so government jobs were the other places where people were able to find employment, as well.

01-00:39:26
Eardley-Pryor: Did either of your grandparents find work after the war?

01-00:39:31
Yoshii: My grandfather on my mother's side, my Sakamoto grandfather, he became a gardener. And so he had a little pickup truck and had different clients that he went to do gardening. My grandmother was a domestic worker, and she worked for a woman up in the Berkeley hills doing housekeeping. On my dad's side, I think my grandfather did some domestic work after the war, but really limited, and he passed away in '58. So he never started up his business again, that was for sure. And my grandmother may have done some domestic work, but not for long. But they saved up their money, and so I think they had kind of money set aside for themselves.

One interesting job was—my other uncle on my Sakamoto side, Henry Sakamoto, they lived across the street from us, and they ended up moving to Hayward. And he opened up a box business. So he got a flatbed truck and he would come—later on, when we moved to El Cerrito, he'd come, pick me up on Saturday morning with my cousin, and we'd go with him on a route and we'd pick up boxes, that were produce boxes that were used by different folks. But he would get them for free, and then my cousin and I would load the boxes on the truck. We would tie it up, and then he had a little work yard out in Hayward where we would redo the boxes. We'd fix the boxes, and then

he'd have them to go back and deliver back to the stores. So we would joke that he had hardly any overhead. He had free labor. That was his entrepreneurship that he developed there.

01-00:41:20
Eardley-Pryor: And connected, as you mentioned, to the produce industry.

01-00:41:23
Yoshii: Exactly, exactly, because he had the connections to the people who were in the produce industry. Said, "Yeah, we'll leave the boxes for you out here," instead of throwing them away somewhere.

01-00:41:31
Eardley-Pryor: That's great.

01-00:41:32
Yoshii: So the original recycling.

01-00:41:35
Eardley-Pryor: That's right. Use and reuse. Well, you were starting to tell some stories about your childhood in Berkeley. I'd love to hear more. What was the environment like that you grew up in?

01-00:41:44
Yoshii: So we lived on Sixth and Channing in West Berkeley. It was predominantly a Black community. One of the things that's very memorable is I was probably one of two only non-Black students from kindergarten all the way up until fifth grade. So I was there up until the fifth grade before we moved to El Cerrito. And so there was kids in the neighborhood we played with. And I don't really remember a whole lot about the school itself. Just kind of no jarring memories at all.

01-00:42:15
Eardley-Pryor: What was that school?

01-00:42:17
Yoshii: It was called Columbus School. It's been renamed now. I can't remember what they renamed it, but it's something other than Columbus. It was probably renamed way back before the recent phenomena of renaming monuments and so forth. Because I think Berkeley, at that time, was doing more progressive things like that. But we also—like my grandmother's house across the street, I mentioned before was kind of a hub of activity there. They were very involved with their church. We belonged to the Christian Layman Church. It was in South Berkeley. It was not in the immediate neighborhood. So we had to drive there to get to church. But it was a Japanese American congregation out of the Uchimura Kanzo tradition from Japan, which is lay oriented.

01-00:32:05
Eardley-Pryor: What does that mean?

01-00:43:07
Yoshii: It was lay oriented. So they didn't have like hired pastors or clergy. So it was all run by the lay people. And my grandparents were a significant part of that first generation leadership. And so they always seemed to have like people over after church on Sundays. There was like a lot of activity going on there, which was just kind of fun, I think. And then the church itself was an extension for me of community life, because it was like a gateway into our ethnic community as Japanese Americans.

01-00:43:46
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. Which it sounds like you didn't have in your neighborhood, except for across the street.

01-00:43:48
Yoshii: Yeah. There were maybe one or two other Japanese American families in the like five-block radius from us. There was a family that lived in another part of Berkeley that was good friends of us, and he used to come on Saturday mornings and pick us up to go play baseball over at San Pablo Park, which was kind of another part of Berkeley. And he was in the produce industry. So he had a produce truck, and he would come and honk the horn on Saturday mornings. We'd jump in the back of his truck and maybe a dozen or so kids he'd pick up, and we'd go play baseball over at the park. It was a lot of fun.

01-00:44:23
Eardley-Pryor: So it sounds like your grandparents had their church community as a way of building bridges with other Japanese Americans. And sports, it sounds like, was a way for you—or sports and church?

01-00:44:34
Yoshii: Yeah. And I think that in retrospect, and as people have done studies about that resettlement time, that churches and temples, Christian and Buddhist temples were very important places for resettlement and kind of reestablishing a sense of community together. And for people to be together with people that either they've already known or people that they're getting to know after the war kind of for mutual support and sustenance. My uncle once told me the story that when they came back, he remembered staying at the Buddhist temple for several days before they went to Richmond. So there was a temple in Oakland that was a hostel, opened up their space as a hostel for returning families.

01-00:45:21
Eardley-Pryor: Hearing some of these experiences of the church makes me wonder about holidays as a youth. What are some of your memories of holidays and maybe food associated with it?

01-00:45:30
Yoshii: Yeah. Well, as Christians, we celebrated major holidays of Christmas and Easter, of course. And my grandmother would be the host. She was kind of like the matriarch of the Sakamoto family and so most of our extended family

would come over. It'd be more like potluck, people bringing their favorite dish. And I think, like over time, we began to understand that the cooking in our family was kind of more of the country cooking and it was actually kind of more survival kind of food, I think. I don't know. It wasn't like your high culture that I would get exposed to later in my life. You realized where you came from. It's kind of different social location, even within the Japanese American community.

01-00:46:17
Eardley-Pryor: Because that's where she grew up, in that southwestern province, right?

01-00:46:21
Yoshii: Right. And I remember one story where my mom was watching a PBS documentary on TV and I can't remember the filmmaker but it was a film about life out on a farm and she called me up and she said, "Hey, you're always asking me about what it was like for you there." Watch this. And so I turned on the PBS and there were like kids gathering around a little fire and they were sitting on wooden boxes and they were making rice over the fire and also cooking whatever they could. I guess vegetables from the farm. And they were very poor. They were like in rag clothes and she said, "That's what it was like." It was something, where, to see it visually, that she could never describe to me or put it to words, so to speak. It was really gripping to me to see that. The realization that they came from poverty and my father's side came from sort of an entrepreneurship background. So by the time the war came I think they were surviving. They were making money but he didn't come here with a lot of money. It wasn't like he was coming from Japan with capital venture money.

01-00:47:44
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, yeah. Survival. You had mentioned holidays, like Christmas and Easter. Also other Japanese Americans I've spoken to in this project have talked about Boys Days, and Girls Days, and New Year's being a traditional gathering—

01-00:48:02
Yoshii: That's right. I totally forgot New Year's. New Year's was a major thing. So New Year's was probably bigger than Christmas and Easter.

01-00:48:07
Eardley-Pryor: Really?

01-00:48:08
Yoshii: Yeah. New Year's was a bigger deal. Because it seemed like there would be other people that would come and visit on New Year's Day. Later, when I'd become a pastor and then I'd be—and the congregation was primarily Japanese American—New Year's was a big celebration for people to visit each other on New Year's Day and people hosting each other. But Boy's Day, Girl's Day, our family didn't celebrate those events prominently.

01-00:48:36
Eardley-Pryor: Are there any particular memories around Christmas or Easter that stand out for you?

01-00:48:41
Yoshii: I think one around Christmas was, as kids, we would gather around the Christmas tree and we'd all get a little envelope with a crisp one dollar bill in it. And it was from the patron that my grandmother worked for, the woman she kept house for up in the Berkeley hills. So I remember having this imagination, about wondering what her house looked like. But it was up in the hills, places where we didn't venture in to.

01-00:49:11
Eardley-Pryor: Imagining she'd have a stack of bills in her house.

01-00:49:15
Yoshii: But each of us as kids would open up that envelope and the George Washington and we'd show each other our bill. But they were all equal. It was almost like she printed the bills.

01-00:49:26
Eardley-Pryor: And the woman that your mother or grandmother worked for? Is that—

01-00:49:31
Yoshii: My grandmother, yeah.

01-00:49:33
Eardley-Pryor: And the hills was a distant land to you, the Berkeley hills?

01-00:49:35
Yoshii: Yeah, yeah. We were as far west in Berkeley as you can imagine and she worked somewhere up there in the hills on the other side of Berkeley.

01-00:49:47
Eardley-Pryor: You'd mentioned that in 1963, your family moved to El Cerrito.

01-00:49:50
Yoshii: Correct.

01-00:49:52
Eardley-Pryor: What was the impetus for that move? And then for your social and racial environment, how did that change?

01-00:49:59
Yoshii: Over time I began to understand the impetus for the move. Partly, I think, was for us, was for a better education and for them to seek a different kind of lifestyle per se. And I think, as we've talked about, where they were able to get a place in Berkeley, this was the next step up probably for them in terms of purchasing another home with the equity that they had developed. But it was also a practical thing because my grandmother lived in Richmond, and as I've shared about my dad's vigilance about taking care and looking out for

her, moving in that direction meant that it would be much more convenient for him in terms of his commute to work, and then also convenience to be close to my grandmother. So, El Cerrito turned out to be sort of the ideal place. From what I understood about it, too, was that the year that we moved, in ’63, that was the year that the Rumford Act was passed in California, in terms of housing discrimination, kind of eliminating housing discrimination. But that law was debated for a couple of years before the federal law was passed in ’68 barring housing discrimination.

But my dad would tell me these stories about the fact that when they went looking for houses in El Cerrito, there were certain places the realtor wouldn’t take them to, and it was kind of understood why. Because Japanese weren’t accepted or allowed in terms of the de facto situation. And the neighborhood that we moved in to, there were already two Japanese American families living on the kitty corner there, which is kind of an interesting thing to remember. Because I remember my parents out on the front of their homes talking with them kind of the week that we moved in. And so I don’t know exactly what they were talking about, but I could imagine that they were welcoming us to the neighborhood and that my dad was probably asking questions about things to look out for, be mindful of.

01-00:51:59

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah. That sounds like they were—one term for it is "pioneering" a neighborhood. From my understanding, again, you said the Columbus Elementary School was majority Black. What was the racial environment like in El Cerrito?

01-00:52:13

Yoshii: El Cerrito. So there were those two Japanese American families, but then I think the majority of the community was white, of course. I think El Cerrito was broken up into different kind of areas. Just like in Berkeley, there was the hill area. So we weren’t in the hill area. We weren’t in the west portion of it, but we were kind of in the flatlands and it was a developing suburb area.

I was welcomed into the neighborhood by a bully. Summer of ’63, I would have been entering the sixth grade that fall. And in that summer, I was welcomed into the neighborhood by a bully who was in the ninth grade, I found out later. He wrestled me to the ground on my neighbor’s lawn and put his knees on my shoulders, and then he just started to beat the heck out of me, punching me in the chest over and over again, and yelling at me, telling me, "You Chinaman, you chink, go back to where you came from." He just kept yelling that at me. The neighbor lady came out and said, "Are you guys okay?" And he whispered in my ears and said, "Don’t say anything to her. If you say anything, I’m going to kill you." And I was just kind of frozen and kind of motionless, so to speak. And he just kind of went on and continued to beat me up. I can’t remember how it happened, but he relented at some point,

and I got up and I ran home. I didn't even tell my parents. I didn't tell them what happened. I just kind of kept it to myself.

01-00:54:03
Eardley-Pryor: That was your entrance into this white neighborhood?

01-00:54:04
Yoshii: Yeah, yeah. And I didn't realize it in the moment, but later on, as I began to understand racial dynamics of the country and the civil rights movement and such, and I heard about his background, that he was a Southern migrant. So he was sort of representative of the Southern racism that people were encountering in the civil rights movement. He wasn't necessarily representative of the whole neighborhood, because there were Southern migrants in the neighborhood but not everybody was of that ilk, per se. And not necessarily indicative of how other neighbors were. That was my introduction. And it was pretty clear to me later in life that I was traumatized by that experience. I was pretty numbed out. And it affected my interactions with white folks later in life, probably from that period on, carrying different feelings of fear of white folks, as well as anger against them. And depending upon the kind of interactions I would have, things would get triggered for me.

01-00:55:11
Eardley-Pryor: What do you mean by that?

01-00:55:12
Yoshii: Well, if I experienced someone with a look on his face, I would keep my distance and kind of walk in another direction. Or if I would have to encounter someone that had the same kind of demeanor—it's the kind of the thing where you're not thinking about it consciously, but it influenced my behavior and reactions to others. Then also, like that period, I was heading into sixth grade, so that period in life where you're exploring different things. I think it probably affected me in different ways. That period in my life was marked by that. There were kind of scars that I had from that experience.

01-00:55:58
Eardley-Pryor: You would have changed to a different school from Columbus School. Where in sixth grade did you begin?

01-00:56:02
Yoshii: Yeah. So I started sixth grade in the fall at a school called Castro School, which was the elementary school. And then back in those days, these schools went from K to sixth grade. So the sixth grade was not middle school as it is now in many school districts. So I was entering into a new school, and the school is really nice, really clean compared to like where I had gone in Berkeley. And one thing that made an impression on me was my sixth grade teacher was an Asian. His name was Mr. Chen. It made an impression on me, of course. But later on I would think that must have been a big deal in 1963 to have an Asian teacher at a school like that. And kind of for the times, as well. But it did make an impression on me to have an Asian role model. [When I

attended Columbus School in Berkeley, all of the teachers throughout my years there were white, even though the majority of the school was Black. I think unconsciously you internalize the belief that whites have the authority on knowledge.]

01-00:56:54
Eardley-Pryor: Especially after that experience with the bully. I imagine moving to a school that was majority white after getting beaten up by this white kid in your neighborhood—I'd be very hesitant.

01-00:57:07
Yoshii: Yeah. And I look back on it now. So I was like entering in this new terrain, new territory. The culture that I had come from, and the neighborhood that I grew up in, is very different from this one. And so there are things that I was learning. Everything was new to me, and it was very different. Very different.

01-00:57:27
Eardley-Pryor: What do you mean by that?

01-00:57:26
Yoshii: Well, just the way you do things, and the way you talk, and so forth. And kids that I would meet would make fun of me because I talk different, the way that I talk, the way that I walked, and things of that nature. But it didn't really bother me. I didn't really feel like that was discriminatory. It was just that I knew that I was coming from a different reality and I was entering into a new reality. I just didn't know what I didn't know.

01-00:57:59
Eardley-Pryor: The social and racial environment that you were in in the East Bay, this just sounds so dynamic. From the mixture of your Black elementary school, then this majority white school, the mixture of Japanese American connections that you have, especially through church. It all seems like an interesting mix in the East Bay.

01-00:58:20
Yoshii: Yeah. The other thing that was memorable to me in my first year at Castle School was when President Kennedy was assassinated. I just really remember that day, just being the sort of ominous feeling.

01-00:58:31
Eardley-Pryor: How did you learn about it?

01-00:58:32
Yoshii: Well, there was an announcement over the school that the president has been killed and that we're going to close school for the day. Everybody was told to go home. I don't know how many days we closed. It may have just been that one day. But I just remember walking home, and I was like just really—I was like looking out at the sky and stuff. It just felt like something really deep. And it opened up for me questions about the world we're living in and about what's going on. I guess I felt some intuition, like there was something much

larger than what's being talked about. So I really got into conspiracy theories about the killing of Kennedy and kind of followed those writings for a period of time. And I look back on it now, because there was something there going on. It wasn't just sort of some accidental thing. It was a lot happening, and I do feel like it was sort of an opening of my consciousness, my social political consciousness in a way, although I didn't have many answers in front of me. It was just sort of this sort of opening of my psyche.

01-00:59:41
Eardley-Pryor: I want to ask about this transition, in the wake of Kennedy's death in '63, at the end of your sixth grade year, you make a transition into junior high.

01-00:59:49
Yoshii: Right.

01-00:59:50
Eardley-Pryor: What was that like, and how was junior high different for you?

01-00:59:54
Yoshii: Junior high. I think what happened in junior high was I started playing basketball. I started gravitating to kids who played basketball in school I think during—I think it was recesses or PE times. I would gravitate to kids playing basketball. I liked playing. I was learning how to play. And then I had friends—it was more interracially. I had one Black friend who was really good at basketball, and then two white friends, and we kind of hung out for a while.

But what I reflect on is that that was also space where we had conversations about race. Because my best friend's father was involved with the civil rights movement, and he was pretty well versed in what was going on. So he would kind of tell us things, and kind of educate us here and there. And then the white friends were from Texas, and they were new also, so they were looking to find people to hang out with. So we were all kind of new, and we kind of found each other through sports, through basketball in particular, and then we'd play. Sometimes we'd have conversations about different things. The white kids I really connected with—maybe, in retrospect, it's because they were from the South and they were white, but they were what I would call informed, enlightened white folks. Because they could talk about the racism that they experienced seeing from where they came from and be somewhat—I don't know what the word might be—confessional about it. And I felt really good about being able to talk with them about some things of that nature. My Black friend first introduced me to the phrase "Uncle Tom." And then I made up my own phrase for "Uncle Shoji," which is the equivalent of a Japanese American who wants to be white. And I just remember that time as being kind of a fertile grounds for us having these kind of conversations.

But we also knew we were in different worlds, too. That my Black friend, he had his Black community and families, and the white kids had their own, and I

did, as well. Because that was the time I was also introduced to the basketball program at the church that I belonged to in Berkeley, which was an all-Japanese American sports league. And so that was a whole different dynamic, as well.

01-01:02:12
Eardley-Pryor: What was that all-Japanese American sports league like for you?

01-01:02:17
Yoshii: Well, it was like kind of an extension of how I mentioned the church was kind of a different place in the community for us as a family. So this was even more so because we had a team at our church, and then we played against teams from other churches and Buddhist temples in the East Bay area. So then I was starting to meet kids from other places in the East Bay and other churches, and then experiencing this whole dynamic of the whole community of Japanese Americans. And it was a lot of fun. I liked playing basketball and meeting new people. But it's also kind of a whole sub-ethnic world that you are a part of, and in retrospect it was kind of invisible because it's not like it was at J-Town, like it was in San Francisco. There was not a specific place that you would say, "Here's where the Japanese Americans are all living." There are pockets of people living throughout the East Bay, and also people connected to different churches and temples.

01-01:03:26
Eardley-Pryor: But they all came together for this sports network?

01-01:03:29
Yoshii: Yeah, yeah. And so over time, you'd go to practice on Friday night, you'd have games maybe on a Saturday or a Sunday, and you'd see all these other Japanese Americans there at the gym. And it was like you could just tell people loved it. Families loved it because they're there supporting their kids. You can imagine today, I don't know, like soccer leagues where you see families coming and descending on a soccer field, and they're all very into it. Families are into supporting their kids. So think about that, except with basketball, in a gymnasium where the whole place is packed with people.

01-01:04:02
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, yeah. And to not have a community hub beyond the church itself, for the whole region, this seems like a way of stitching the ethnic community together frequently.

01-01:04:14
Yoshii: Yeah.

01-01:04:14
Eardley-Pryor: What did that do for your social life then?

01-01:04:16
Yoshii: Well, I think for my social life, obviously then a big portion of time was spent in that social reality of a Japanese American community, an invisible

community is the way I would call it. And then you'd have your school events and things going on, too. But I think primary energy was spent there because weekends would be this particular set of community, and your school time is with your school friends. I also played baseball, too, in a Japanese baseball league. So it was the same kind of thing, except the teams were sponsored not by churches but by different organizations that were specifically Japanese American. So you had your baseball season, then you'd have your basketball season. You were kind of covered around the year.

01-01:05:07
Eardley-Pryor: It's such a dynamic mix that I'm hearing, with social and racial integration in some ways, but also segregation in other ways.

01-01:05:16
Yoshii: Right, right. And what I would later come to understand, too, particularly as I was pastoring, was that sports leagues were very important at camp. And sports was important at camp because it helped sort of normalize life. And my grandfather on my father's side really loved going to see the baseball games that were organized in camp. And there were segregated leagues before camp, as well. There were segregated particularly baseball leagues, and basketball leagues as well. And so there was some continuity of that into the camp life. And then in post-camp life, I think sports was another kind of anchor for people to gather in the community together, particularly where you're supporting children and young people. And that seems to be kind of a legacy prior to camp, and then through camp, and then post-camp life, that sports becomes a space for anchoring of community, and then the bonding of relationships that people have and continue to cultivate for themselves.

01-01:06:21
Eardley-Pryor: I want to ask about you learning about the World War II mass incarceration of Japanese Americans, about the experience of your parents and grandparents. How did you learn about that? Is now an okay time to transition to that?

01-01:06:34
Yoshii: Yeah, sure.

01-01:06:35
Eardley-Pryor: And what did you learn about it?

01-01:06:37
Yoshii: It was actually in junior school. Portola Junior High was where I went to junior high school. And there was a girl in one of the classes who was Japanese American, and she shared with other Japanese Americans about the camps and doing education about that. And I think she belonged to the Junior JACL, Japanese American Citizens League. I think her family was probably very involved in the Japanese Americans Citizens League, and so she was part of the Junior JACL, and so she was sharing some literature, information about it. And when I looked at that, it was the first time I really heard about the existence of the camps. And, of course, I went home and I asked my parents

about it. There was a little bit of discomfort in terms of their reaction to my bringing the subject up. We didn't get really far with the conversation at that particular time, and I think that sort of made me angry, to learn about this history that I had never been told about. But it was sort of the beginning of that kind of conversation.

01-01:07:45
Eardley-Pryor: How did you internalize your parents reactions?

01-01:07:48
Yoshii: If I think back on it, I could tell like something was not right here. Because they didn't talk a lot about things, I didn't know what was missing here. And I'm thinking back about it now, just in this moment, that I don't recall going on some search to get the history. I don't remember that. Maybe because I was too busy playing basketball. I don't know. But it's just my awareness was there of the camps.

01-01:08:31
Eardley-Pryor: Did your awareness of the camps have any impact on your social environment? I'm picturing you then, and junior high is a time for self-identity. You're coming into your own, and you're in this dynamic racial environment, and this new white community that you now have moved to. You had spent so much time in a Black community. The basketball friends that you have outside of the church sports is very much mixed. And then you're also spending a lot of time in a specifically Japanese American ethnic community with the sports league. I'm wondering because the ways that you learned about camp at this time, it's such a rich time in your life, too, of self-development.

01-01:09:16
Yoshii: Yeah. I think there wasn't like one moment or period where I'm learning more and more about the camp experience itself, except that this becomes information that is common knowledge to me at that point in time of my life. I think incrementally I would begin to learn a little bit more and more about things, particularly as I had more conversations with my parents. I don't remember myself at junior high always coming and saying, "Okay, tell me more, tell me more, tell me more." That wasn't the case. I was like off doing my thing, probably just like playing basketball, having friends and doing things that junior highers do, I think.

But I do think I internalized some of their stories in terms of the camps. I can't remember details. My father was much more vocal about saying things, but he would also get angry a lot when he'd start to talk about it. Sometimes he'd get angry and walk out of the room, and I'd go, "Oh." My mother was very quiet. She would hardly say anything about it except that, "It was the best thing for us." And then I'd get mad at her, like "What do you mean, it's the best thing for you?" And I think incrementally, over time, I absorbed the fact that this was part of our community history and was part of my identity in this way.

But I think the watershed moment was when I was in tenth grade, when I was in high school, and Martin Luther King got assassinated. It was April 1968, and I was in an English class. And the teacher was facilitating conversation about the killing of King and how tragic it was. And I spoke up in the class and said something to the nature of, like—oh, and the backdrop of it, too, was that there was a lot of looting that was going on along San Pablo in El Cerrito and into Richmond. A lot of businesses got trashed because there were protests and looting was taking place. And my father's store, I think, may have gotten damaged, too. And I don't know exactly how I got this voice in my heart, in my mind, but I spoke up in class. I said, "Why can't the Blacks just like suck it up, and work hard, and quit complaining about things—like the Japanese Americans did? Because we were put in camps, and like look at us now? I mean people are working hard, and making money, and surviving." And so my English teacher responded to me and says, "Wait a minute. You're totally wrong here. You cannot compare the experience of Japanese Americans and what happened in wartime with the legacy of slavery in the Black community. They're totally different things. There's commonalities, but they're different things." And I was like taken aback and embarrassed in front of the class and all that.

But it really, really spoke to me in a way that made me question about the comparison between the two, or this narrative that I was spinning. And I think I was bringing the narrative that kind of was coming to me from whatever I was exposed to up to that particular time. And it changed my whole perspective. And the camps were still a pivotal piece of our history, but I think I began to understand that it wasn't the same as slavery. They were incredibly different. There was a history of slavery, and then there was also more history to what happened with the mass incarceration as well that I didn't know about because we weren't learning about it in school.

01-01:13:01

Eardley-Pryor: You'd said it made a difference for you. I'm wondering in what ways. Part of what I'm hearing you say is you had internalized the myth of the model minority and then spoken that during this classroom conversation in the wake of King's murder. And you said that [the teacher's response] affected you. You took that critique where your English teacher said, "they're different, you need to educate yourself." In what ways did you carry that forward?

01-01:13:28

Yoshii: Well, I began to really kind of gravitate more toward understanding Black history. And so for whatever reason, I was drawn to the Nation of Islam and to Black Muslims. I think because in the East Bay there were a lot of Black Muslim bakeries and places where you could actually go in and buy some baked goods, and then get the Nation of Islam newspaper, and I started reading that. Somehow I got a copy of the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. That was later on in life, I think, that that autobiography came out. It was probably through the Nation of Islam that I was reading about Malcolm X. And then,

the Black Panthers were very prominent in the East Bay at that particular time, and I would pick up literature from them, as well. So I just sort of gravitated toward different narratives of the Black community and history. As somebody involved in sports, I really loved Muhammed Ali and kind of was following his career and the things that he was saying. And so I was getting much more educated as the English teacher was challenging me to do on the Black history and what really that's all about. I started to begin to form this implicit solidarity with Black community in a different way that I had already had, because I had had Black friends and white friends that we had talked about race issues with. But it was getting to a much more sophisticated place, being in high school.

It wasn't until, I think, when I went to college and I was at UC Berkeley and taking the Asian Studies class that I got more immersed also into Asian American history, as well. Because I wasn't—frankly speaking, I wasn't learning a lot about Asian American history in high school, and we weren't learning a lot about the camp experience in high school either. That wasn't part of the curriculum. And it was very piecemeal, what I was learning and understanding, and so forth.

01-01:15:30

Eardley-Pryor: You attended high school, I assume in El Cerrito, from 1966 to 1970, and that is such a rich time in the history of the East Bay, particularly with the rise of the Panthers, the Black Panthers movement. And to hear you talk that you were exposed to literature, I'm just curious about other memories you have—because it's so regionally specific and so historic—of your engagement around what the Black Panthers were doing in the East Bay.

01-01:15:59

Yoshii: Well, just the awareness that they were organizing and having rallies and things of that nature. If you were anywhere around things, people would be passing out literature about what the Panthers were and what they were doing—their breakfasts, things for kids. And then you start following the news, and you start seeing kinds of stereotypes that are being portrayed. Particularly, like with the Panthers, you can tell that there's a media narrative that's trying to tag them as being "the bad guys" and "the violent people," whereas they're speaking about defending themselves. And they had no apologies about being armed to defend themselves against police brutality or the Nation of Islam, things that I was very interested in.

It's interesting to wonder why at that point in my life, but maybe it was because I had this inclination toward religion. But to hear the words of Elijah Muhammad and speak about why they needed this Nation of Islam, and the way they spoke explicitly about the Black experience in the context of this Islamic religion, and then how deep, as you begin to read things from Malcolm X and hear what he's saying. Riveting speeches that he's making as

you get kind of recordings of them. I don't remember. Like Malcolm X was assassinated in the sixties, too. '65 I think it was, right?

01-01:17:34
Eardley-Pryor: Yes, '65, or somewhere around there.

01-01:17:37
Yoshii: Yeah, yeah. So there was a lot there. I would learn much more later on as I was in college, and just even later on in life, as well. More details about some of the dynamics of what was going on with Malcolm X and with Elijah Muhammad. That kind of sector of the movement, versus what was happening with Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the South. But those became kind of points of information. I don't know. It's kind of what became learning over a period of time about some of that.

01-01:18:18
Eardley-Pryor: Well, in terms of learning, you had mentioned that you went on to college. What was the step, from El Cerrito High School in 1970 when you graduated high school, to college for you?

01-01:18:26
Yoshii: What do you mean "the step?"

01-01:18:30
Eardley-Pryor: What were you thinking whenever you graduated high school?

01-01:18:32
Yoshii: Oh. For our family, I don't think there were high expectations about higher education, that if we went to college that would be great. My brother had already gone, enrolled in UC Berkeley. And I think he was already done, because he was in the National Guard, I think, when I started. But UC Berkeley was the place to go. I didn't really even shop around for other colleges. For me, it was like the community college, because it was not that hard to get in to at that particular time. Compared to today, tuition wasn't exorbitant, and so it's just sort of like something that was sort of an unspoken expectation. Go to college, get a degree, and then hopefully that'll advance you in your life.

But I realized later on that my parents, they didn't have a college experience. So they didn't have that in their minds to prep us and think about things the way we're consumed with that with our kids, and try to help advise them about the best route to take for education, and so forth. They weren't recipients of that higher education in ways that would sort of inform and direct us for our lives. At least for me. And so I just sort of went to Berkeley, kind of as sort of the expectation to get a college education. I didn't really think about what I was doing or didn't really have any particular educational aspirations or goals. They began to get formulated as I enrolled in school.

01-01:19:58
Eardley-Pryor: What kinds of classes did you take? What were you interested in?

01-01:20:01
Yoshii: This is what I did. I went through the catalogue and went through courses that I thought I would be interested in, and I tried to match it with whatever major would be closest. And it turned out to be Criminology, but the Crim department was closed down that year, in 1970. I can't remember exactly what the conditions were, why they closed, so I couldn't major in Crim. And I ended up majoring in Social Welfare. I was gravitating to courses that were very much, I guess what you'd call sort of general Sociology, Psychology, Education, and helping people, kind of helping professions. So that's kind of what I was gravitating toward. But while I was there, I was developing an interest to go to law school. There's maybe more of a romanticization of going into law, because there were other friends who were thinking of that, too—people I was meeting, people planning to go to med school, go to law school, and stuff. I kind of latched on to that idea. And I took a course in Asian Studies about Asians and the law, and that kind of got me interested in that. But after going to undergraduate school, I did work in an alternative legal justice program.

01-01:21:16
Eardley-Pryor: After college, you mean?

01-01:21:18
Yoshii: After college, yeah. And that experience kind of turned me away from pursuing law school. I went there, actually, to volunteer to get more experience, and there was actually a position open and I applied for it. I got it, and it was working with first-time offenders, and also ex-offenders, around helping people resettle and get jobs. But I just didn't like the legal system. I had to go to court every day and kind of be there in conversations with judges, and public defenders, and district attorneys and things. I didn't take to it, and it kind of soured me from the idea of going to law school. Kind of paused on that.

01-01:22:03
Eardley-Pryor: Something we haven't talked about yet, but I feel like I'd be remiss not to ask, is your experience with regards to the Vietnam War. From '65 through the early seventies, this time where you're in high school and in college, in the Berkeley area, it's just such a dynamic space for the anti-war movement, let alone the rise of ethnic studies, and you're taking classes about an Asian American consciousness. With all of that happening, what was your experience vis-à-vis America's engagement in Vietnam?

01-01:22:31
Yoshii: Yeah. And so I think in high school, I probably wasn't that conscious or didn't have much conversations about the Vietnam War. But once I got into Berkeley, that kind of just was really in front of me because there was a lot of anti-war protests going on. And I joined. I started joining some of them. And I

think it was probably both through being involved in Asian studies classes and also beginning to formulate an understanding of this particular war, a war in Asia upon Vietnamese people. I always loved what Muhammed Ali was saying: "I got nothing against these Vietnamese because they've nothing against me. But I got issues here in this own country because people are holding me back here." But for us, as Asians, looking at what was going on in Vietnam, I think there was a visceral reaction to that particular incursion into Vietnam. So I think coupled with sort of a growing Asian American consciousness, and then the war being part of that as well, I think sort of opened me up into that arena of more anti-war protests.

01-01:23:58
Eardley-Pryor: From your junior high and high school experience engaged in the sports networks that were mostly Japanese American, to your studies in college of Asian American studies or Asian Studies, that seems to me like a transition, a broadening.

01-01:24:15
Yoshii: Absolutely, yeah.

01-01:24:18
Eardley-Pryor: How did that play out, then, for the rest of your experience in college and then after college to the choices you made for where you'd live, and what you'd do for work?

01-01:24:27
Yoshii: I think from college, I was just trying to find my way. Like I said, I went to this particular job in the criminal justice system. And then, from there, I was recruited to another job, another non-profit that was working with Asian immigrants. It was called Asians for Job Opportunities in Berkeley [A JOB], and they were servicing immigrants coming from Southeast Asia—Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia—China, Korea, Philippines. And we had an ESL problem in which they would learn vocational English, and then I was in the job development unit. So I was there doing work to try to help connect them with employers, to find jobs for them as they came into the program. So that work was really good because it was very practical around understanding some of the immigration issues that were going on, and the challenge that they were facing as folks coming from these various countries.

And also for me, working there sparked another kind of internal reflection period for me. Because as I was working with these immigrants, it started causing me to think about my own grandparents, and what was it like when they were coming. We'd talked about it in Asian Studies, but it was more like I was really asking myself, like, more about the details of their lives, and their experiences coming in to the country, and the things that they encountered while they were struggling with things. And also, it was maybe a period in my life where I was stirred up to—kind of my feelings about where the Japanese American community was at. And maybe it was sort of a synchronicity,

because around that time, I think talks about Redress and Reparations were beginning to happen. And I didn't make a conscious connection with it at that time, but I was feeling this sense of angst about where our Japanese community was at, and that it was like—the phrase I would use now is there was sort of a spiritual malaise within our community. And even though I had fun playing in basketball, being in sports leagues and stuff, I think there was a feeling I had about this sort of spiritual malaise that was present in our community.

01-01:27:02

Eardley-Pryor: Can you share a little bit more about where you think that's coming from? I'm hearing you tell stories about your own trajectory of service, wanting to serve community, majoring in Social Welfare, taking this work in a criminal justice program, and then in this job-placement unit for Asian immigrants that are coming in. Through that experience, where is it that you are seeing the spiritual malaise arise within Japanese Americans?

01-01:27:30

Yoshii: I think I use that term, spiritual malaise now, because I have the hindsight of using spiritual language. At the time, I probably didn't have that language. It's just something I felt, I was feeling inside. And I think it probably was that I was struggling with my Japanese American identity. Like when I was at UC Berkeley, you have Asian American Studies and there was this sense of political identity being Asian American. But I always still felt that there was something peculiar to our experience as Japanese Americans that we weren't really addressing. In other words, our experience was not the same as these new incoming refugees from Southeast Asia or those coming from China. Their experience was much more similar to my grandparents experience of their immigration, but it was in a different era. Right? So my experience as the third generation, here I was, the benefit of the sacrifices that my grandparents or my parents had made. And what was that legacy for me? I think those were the questions I was beginning to ask.

And I think it was peculiar in a way. For me, I can, in reflection, understand that I was asking this existential question. Like, why was I born here, as a Japanese American, in this world? What am I supposed to do with my life? And is my life supposed to be here to help service new immigrants coming to this country? That was the job I was in, right? And I was asking myself the question: is this what I want to do the rest of my life? So it was probably more reflective of my internal process of finding myself. I was still kind of in that phase of life where I was finding who I was, and kind of what I wanted to do, or what I was called to do in this world. And I wasn't fixed in a particular profession. I just knew that I had left that idea of going into law, and I was in another job just exploring, and continued to explore.

01-01:29:26

Eardley-Pryor: That's great. Do you mind if we pause for a moment?

01-01:29:28
Yoshii: Sure.

[Pause in recording]

01-01:29:31
Eardley-Pryor: Michael, you had mentioned you were reflecting in your work experience with Asian immigrants about the existential question of your own life experience, especially in the context of being a Sansei, third generation Japanese American. But from our many conversations in advance of your oral history, you've also shared that you went through a different kind of existential crisis around the same time in the mid-seventies. What was that experience for you?

01-01:29:56
Yoshii: Yeah. At that same time I was working with the immigrant population, a good friend of mine killed himself playing Russian roulette with a bunch of friends, and it was quite a shock to me. His father called me up the very next day, telling me that he'd killed himself. And somehow, I got into this autopilot mode of going over to them and helping them organize a memorial service for him. I would later come to understand, as I became a pastor, that somehow there was this thing within me to know how to help families that were suffering from a loss, and I put a lot of energy into helping them organize a service. After that was over, kind of the adrenaline was gone from that, that event, I kind of went into my own depression. I kind of realized over a period of time that I was just kind of entering into this period of post-traumatic stress. There were things I couldn't do. We were friends, having played basketball together for several years, and I couldn't—

01-01:31:12
Eardley-Pryor: In the Japanese American league?

01-01:31:14
Yoshii: Yeah. We had extended into like our college years, playing in the same leagues, except for older folks. So I couldn't even go into a gymnasium. Just like there was an invisible wall. I had my duffel bag, go to gym, it's like I hit the wall and didn't know what was going on. It just kind of went into a real tailspin in my life, too. I had married my college girlfriend that year, and then our marriage kind of was coming to an end, and a lot of it was due, I think, to my own depression and going into a tailspin in my life.

But it also was a catalyst for me to begin a spiritual exploration, because I started again asking these existential questions. What happens to a lot of people is you have survivor's guilt, and I think I was experiencing some of that. Like, why am I here, and why was he taken? And I would have dreams of him that would sort of sometimes be haunting to me. But then it opened up this sort of new question for me about existential reality, and where did he go? Where is he now? What am I doing here in my life? As a result of that, like dreams that I was having of him, I started to get into dream work and healing

and psychology, which also has a sort of spiritual bent towards it in terms of spiritual consciousness or psychology. From dreamwork, I was getting into different spiritualities, like Tibetan Buddhism, which kind of understands that dreams are part of our cosmic reality. I was exploring meditation and Buddhism of all different forms besides Tibetan Buddhism, like Zen. And I also gravitated toward Sufism, which is a mystical branch of Islam, and particularly around the healing aspects of sound and music. And I was studying some music around Indian ragas, which are kind of the healing melodies that you can sing for any state of the soul that you might be in. I really loved that, as well. But that process was kind of just bringing me to this clarity that there was a spiritual search going on for me, too. And it was my Sufi teacher who kind of led me back to Christianity. Because I didn't want to touch Christianity at that time in my life—

01-01:33:59

Eardley-Pryor: I was going to ask you why. You grew up in this Christian environment. You had these great social networks. Your grandparents were church leaders. But your exploration through Sufism and Buddhism and Islam, it sounds like you were avoiding that.

01-01:34:15

Yoshii: I was avoiding it because of the social-political identity that I had crafted for myself, which had become more anti-Christian because of its colonial history and its imperialistic history through the centuries. And so I really had an aversion to Christianity. But what he did was, he brought me back into looking at Christianity by looking at hymns that I had grown up with that might be containers of spiritual energy for me. So simple hymns that I had grown up with in church, and I began to look at them and revisit. And sure enough, I began to feel a reconnection to the faith in kind of incremental ways along the way. And then the efficacy of really understanding Jesus as a figure that was not necessarily one-and-the-same as the institution, of all the Christian institutions and denominations and so forth that went along with it. So I gradually was finding my way. But it wasn't like it all took place in one moment. It was a process that took place.

01-01:35:38

Eardley-Pryor: And that journey that you're on in the wake of your friend's accidental death, it sounds like there's a wrestling with emotion, of trying to understand what it was you were feeling, and then trying to find some sort of spiritual outlet in the way that music and communion allows for an emotional outlet.

01-01:35:59

Yoshii: Yeah. At that time in my life, like he was twenty-two when he passed, I was twenty-four. I had no language for grief. I was not familiar with what was more popularized later around the Kubler-Ross stages of grieving and didn't have any language for grieving. And I was not raised in a way where you expressed your emotions. For me, maybe just personality wise, I was not somebody who was free to express my feelings and emotions. So there was a

lot of pain I was carrying that I didn't know how to articulate or to express. So that was part of the challenge that I was going through at that particular phase in my life. It was really taking me to dark places internally, and it was really challenging. In spiritual terms, we might talk about it as being part of the dark night of the soul, that I was entering into this period where I was really struggling with the darkness of life and also the darkness inside my soul, as well.

01-01:37:02
Eardley-Pryor: The outlets that you did find to help wrestle through that "dark night of the soul," like the musical outlets and Sufism and the chanting—tell me a little bit more about how you found your way through to the light.

01-01:37:19
Yoshii: Well, I think it was definitely a process. I didn't realize I was on a spiritual search. I was just gravitating to things that were kind of helping me feel better. And dreams was really one vehicle for that, because I was having dreams about him, or he was in my dreams. And then I'd have vivid dreams of other things then. I was kind of exploring this whole phenomenon of dreamwork, beginning to write down your dreams, and to understand kind of what the messages are on dreams. In Jungian psychology, there's a whole methodology I'm sure you're familiar with around that. And the dreamwork kind of lends itself to your entrance into spiritual traditions. At that time, particularly with Tibetan Buddhism and then with other traditions as well, just kind of picking up different tools for healing is what I was doing unconsciously, I guess, is what was happening.

01-01:38:26
Eardley-Pryor: You have shared with me in terms of dreams that you had a dream in particular that connected to an Old Testament story. I'm wondering about that story and the context that it came to you in.

01-01:38:40
Yoshii: The context of that was the Redress movement emerging. And then, I was thinking about the Japanese community, and the questions that I had, and feelings that I had about our spiritual malaise in the community. I was trying to just reconcile personal spirituality and social justice.

And then this dream came to me of this figure holding a scroll and saying you won't understand this until you read Ezekiel, and he opened up a scroll. And then there were like wheels or something like that in the dream imagery, as well. And so, at that particular time, I think I was already involved in the Redress movement, and I was doing outreach to churches and things. So I was doing outreach to churches. I was asking people to consider coming to testify at the hearings. But at one church, I asked the pastor about the Ezekiel 37 and she said, "Oh, that's an old Testament Prophet." It wasn't like somebody I was familiar with. And so we started a Bible study, and we went all the way through the book until I got to chapter thirty-seven. And there's the very

famous story of the Valley of the Dry Bones, where this prophet Ezekiel is put out into this valley where there's these dry bones of folks who have been killed and exiled. And he is called by God to speak to the dry bones, to breathe life into them. So the words he uses is to "breathe spirit" into these dry bones, and cause them to rise up and to come together, bone to bone, and connect once again. And so that was a story of spiritual resurrection of a community in the Hebrew scriptures that I immediately translated to my community of Japanese Americans. That's what we were doing. We were trying to breathe life into our community in a way that our community has a spiritual resurrection. And coming together bone to bone, too. A very kind of clear feeling of collective spirituality, not just individual personal spirituality.

01-01:41:15
Eardley-Pryor: God, what a powerful—and that came to you in a dream?

01-01:41:18
Yoshii: It came to me in a dream, but the meaning of it didn't come until later when I actually read the text and read the story, and then really appropriated it. And that text has been used often in many places around empowerment of communities from a spiritual standpoint. And the power of collective spirituality, as well. Rising up, connecting to each other, bone to bone.

01-01:41:46
Eardley-Pryor: The wheel imagery, as well, it reminds me of Tibetan Buddhism and role the wheel plays in Buddhism [in samsara].

01-01:41:52
Yoshii: Yeah, yeah. And there's imagery of wheels within that particular chapter of Ezekiel, as well.

01-01:42:01
Eardley-Pryor: You mentioned the realization of the Ezekiel dream and that its meaning came from a Bible study after talking to a pastor as a part of your engagement with the Redress and Reparations movement. How was it that you got involved in Redress?

01-01:42:18
Yoshii: So after I was working at the place with the immigrant support issues, I was working with some folks in a project with Japanese Americans in the East Bay who were thinking about starting a community center there. And it was in that context that the Redress movement was beginning, and it was a group called National Coalition for Redress and Reparations, which was really doing the grassroots outreach and organizing in San Francisco Bay Area. And so I connected with them and signed up to volunteer to do outreach to families in the East Bay. And the churches and temples were kind of like the primary places for me to go and share information about what was going on with the Redress movement, also with the upcoming schedule of the hearings, and then encouraging people and inviting people to come testify for the hearings.

01-01:43:13
Eardley-Pryor: Where were you at in your spiritual journey—in dealing with this existential personal crisis, and then also your sense of this communal existentialism? Where were you at in that journey when you began engagement with Redress?

01-01:43:27
Yoshii: Well, I think, like many folks, social justice and spirituality kind of get bifurcated. And for me, they were beginning to come together, and the fact that there was this movement happening in my own community that was very viscerally connected to me bodily and spiritually and holistically. And I think what the challenge was, was blending my spiritual practices in with that activism at that particular time. And it wasn't coming right away, but it would come in the ensuing months and years.

01-01:44:09
Eardley-Pryor: You told me earlier how, when you first learned about the mass incarcerations during World War II and what happened here to your mom and dad, when you brought it up with them, they had very different reactions and that led to a lot of confusion maybe, or questioning, uncertainty, in your own experience. When you became engaged in Redress and began reaching out to these different Japanese American communities about this topic, I'm wondering how that played out in your family connections, in your family relations.

01-01:44:39
Yoshii: Yeah. So I actually sat down and talked about it. I told them that I was working on Redress. I explained to them what Redress is all about, and their interest was piqued. And then I asked them if they would want to testify, and I told them I'm trying to outreach to different people to get families to testify. And they both said clearly no, they don't think they could or would do that. I think we also asked my uncle, and he kind of hesitated, too. But in the process of that, they began to share more about their experiences. And I think then our conversations about what had happened started to go deeper in terms of more of the salient details around things. And then, I told them I'd like to testify then if you don't want to testify. And they said that's fine, and they sort of blessed my participation in the hearings.

So I began to think about what I wanted to say. And part of what I gravitated toward was to talk about the psychological impacts of the camps, and kind of what my perception was about the fact that the Redress movement had been using a metaphor that we had been subjected to collective rape. Kind of for me, intuitively, my feeling was if we'd been collectively raped, we've been collectively wounded, but we haven't been able to heal from that, and hopefully this process would be one that's going to help that. But also, there's much more to it than just this thing about doing the hearings or passing on some legislation, if you think about the parallels to somebody being victimized by rape. So that was kind of the focus I was gravitating towards in terms of testifying.

There were three days of hearings in San Francisco, and my parents came to all of them. I think my uncle came to sit with my parents. So many people that I had known in the community came to the hearings. Of course, it was San Francisco Bay Area hearings, so it was kind of all over the metropolitan San Francisco area. And it was just so profound. The energy there of people. I think there were like five hundred people in the room, and just the gripping testimonies from Isseis, from Niseis, and Sanseis like myself. You can feel people just listen to every word. It was a very cathartic experience to me, for me personally, but it was clearly a cathartic experience for our whole community. So the metaphor I was bringing over from the scripture, the spiritual resurrection, I really was feeling that happening. And it was answering my existential question about my own life. It didn't answer my purpose, but there was a reason I'm a Japanese American, and we're telling our story. It felt very powerful. And also, the hearings also kind of catapulted me into the spiritual direction that I began to move on vocationally. Because I felt, for me personally, the hearings were a spiritual catalyst as much as it was a political tool for the passage of the Redress legislation. That it kind of catapulted me into the direction of going into seminary.

01-01:48:03

Eardley-Pryor: Well, we have about fifteen minutes before our time today will come to a close. Do you want to continue to tell about that experience and that direction, or should we pause today to take up that part in your next session?

01-01:48:16

Yoshii: Whatever you want to do is fine with me.

01-01:48:19

Eardley-Pryor: Okay. Well, I'd love to hear more about this experience of being at the Redress hearings in August of 1981, the Bay Area hearings, and about that energy that's in the room. I'm so curious about your intergenerational experience, about how you remember hearing Issei, Nisei, and then for yourself the Sansei testimonies, and in what ways that they were different or similar.

01-01:48:45

Yoshii: Well, obviously the difference is that Issei that testified, it was being translated from their personal experiences, right? And the Nisei also had the personal experience of being incarcerated. For those of us, the Sansei, we were coming after the fact, we were born after the wartime experience had happened, for most Sansei that were testifying. But I do think there was this positive dynamic in having Sansei testify, because it meant that there was an intergenerational presence in the room that the commissioners were hearing and that also our community was feeling. This intergenerational solidarity around this particular issue, I think, was a very strong feeling. And for me personally, it was like my voice mattered, too. My story in this. I mean, it's a very small one in comparison to the larger narrative, but that it's a part of it. I think that made a difference for me. There was diversity of stories, too, that

people were telling, because everybody had their own experiences. Everybody had their own family experiences. Everybody had their own different experiences pre-war and into the war. There were veterans, as well. The one thing that was missing in the hearings was the voices of the resistors, the Heart Mountain Resistors who were put in jail. Many of them were imprisoned at Leavenworth. In fact, later on, as I became a pastor and I was involved in some different things, kind of follow-up efforts to Redress, I would hear the stories of the Heart Mountain Resistors from one of my own members who had a brother who was a resistor and a brother who was a veteran. There was a strategic reason, I believe, why those stories were not encouraged, because there was a sense that those stories would not add value to passing the legislation, is my understanding of things.

01-01:50:50
Eardley-Pryor: In the wake of the hearings and your work to make those hearings possible, to gather stories from the different communities that you went to to help make the hearings a reality, what did you do in the wake of that?

01-01:51:05
Yoshii: I'm not sure I understand the question.

01-01:51:07
Eardley-Pryor: I guess I'm thinking about my own experiences, of when you have that sort of mountaintop experience. Coming down from the mountaintop is often like, "Oh, where do we go from here?" Where did you go from there?

01-01:51:20
Yoshii: Well, the hearings were going on in different cities around the country, I think, where there were high populations of Japanese Americans. So in New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, LA, Seattle, San Francisco Bay Area. In some sense that was just the beginning part of the movement to get the testimonies. And then, the testimonies had to be compiled by the commission. And then folks were then beginning to work on lobbying, on going to Congress and lobby the effort to pass legislation on it. This first part was just the gathering of stories and hearing of those stories. For me, I didn't get involved with the lobbying because I ended up going to seminary. In that regard, I put a pause on my proactive engagement with the Redress. But I continued to get invitations to participate in lobbying and updates on the progress of the legislation.

01-01:52:31
Eardley-Pryor: I want to ask about also, in this time, in this next phase in your life, you mentioned seminary. It's also a time when you meet your wife Suzanne. Can you tell me a little bit about how you met, and a little about Suzanne herself?

01-01:52:46
Yoshii: Yeah. We connected through this Japanese community center project, and we really connected. We were both in this kind of stage of our lives, I think, or me in particular I think, kind of like getting back involved in life. As I use the

phrase spiritual resurrection, I think we had kind of long conversations about where we are in our lives. And she was from Japan. So she came here when she was in high school. And she was just one year younger than me. And we actually both were at UC Berkeley at the same time, but we never met during that period of time. But I think it was like our spiritual compatibility, because we were both kind of exploring sort of like spiritual mysticism, and that was a key part of our lives. The Japanese American portion of it was different for her because she didn't have the same experience. But because she was from Japan, she had a different kind of personal history, which was very interesting to me. Her mom was in the bombing of Hiroshima as a child, and her aunty, as well. So they were Hibakusha. They were survivors of that, and we were connecting on those stories, and what that meant for her to be a child of Hibakusha. But long story short is that we really connected.

And then she wanted to have a family, and I was game. At that point in my life, I was open to new things and new opportunities to express life. So we had a child. It was 1983, Sachi was our first born. And our second was in 1985. And Suzanne really also was the one that sort of encouraged me to go to seminary and pushed me to go to seminary. She called me a diamond in the rough, that I had a lot of refining to do. And school would help me do that, and also save her from my kind of going all over the place with my wild ideas and things of that nature. So anyway, I applied to seminary in 1983, was accepted in September of 1983, the same year our first daughter was born. It was kind of a crazy time. But I got a scholarship and was accepted into school. So I went for it. It kind of opened the door to a new chapter of life. Definitely like kind of the parallel experiences, of experiencing being part of the Redress movement and beginning a new relationship and starting a family. It was all part of my spiritual resurrection in that period.

01-01:55:30
Eardley-Pryor: That's a great story talking about the internal crisis that, then, you work your way through in a community-oriented way, and also find this personal spiritual connection with a partner. You were reborn around the same time that your children are born.

01-01:55:47
Yoshii: Right. Exactly. Yeah.

01-01:55:51
Eardley-Pryor: Very life-giving. Well, this might be a great place to pause. We'll pick up in our next session on your resurrected life.

01-01:55:59
Yoshii: Okay.

01-01:56:00
Eardley-Pryor: Thank you, Michael.

01-01:56:01
Yoshii: All right.

Interview 2: August 19, 2022

02-00:00:00
Eardley-Pryor: Today is Friday, August 19, 2022. My name is Roger Eardley-Pryor from the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. This is interview session number 2 with Michael Yoshii as a part of the Japanese American Intergenerational Narratives Oral History Project. Michael, it's great to see you, again.

02-00:00:20
Yoshii: Good to see you, too, Roger.

02-00:00:21
Eardley-Pryor: Can you remind me where you're located today?

02-00:00:24
Yoshii: I'm in Alameda, California, where I reside.

02-00:00:26
Eardley-Pryor: Great. I am at my home in Santa Rosa, California. We are recording over Zoom amidst the ongoing pandemic. My family just had COVID this past couple of weeks [laughs]. So, it's great to be together in this virtual space.

At the end of your first interview session, we were brought up to the point in your personal journey of entering seminary. You'd recently become married, you had the beginning of your family, both of your daughters were born around that time. You began seminary in the Fall of 1983. And so, I want to ask about that time, that meaningful time. What were some of the more meaningful memories that come from your time during seminary?

02-00:01:07
Yoshii: Well, one experience, which is still vivid in my memory, was in between the first and second semester which we called the intersession for Pacific School of Religion. So, there were courses in January that you could take, like week-long classes, or two or three-day workshops, and so forth. And I was taking a class every morning on prayer and meditation taught by a woman named Flora Wuellner. And on the first day of the class, we had been through deep mediation in the morning, and I was driving home to have lunch with my wife—coming home and then she was going to have lunch prepared for me. And I pulled over the car because I just had this overwhelming feeling of emotions hit me, and I was just kind of weeping there kind of for a few moments. And then I gathered myself together, and then started the car back up, and went home.

And then as I got into the house, and Suzanne had lunch for me at the dining table, I sat down, and as I was sitting across from her, she looked at me and said, "There's something on your shoulder, kind of hovering over your right shoulder." And she says, "Do you feel it?" And I said, "Yeah. I feel something there. It's like something's just kind of floating there." And I said, "Do you feel it, too?" And she said, "No, it's only on you." And I said, "Wow." And

then, as she said that, I felt it just descend into my body, and I felt this overwhelming feeling, just a glowing feeling, and just being surrounded by this presence. And then she said, "I think I better leave you alone."

02-00:03:00

Yoshii: And so, she left the room, and I went and sat down in the living room, and I put a fire on, we had a fireplace there. And I just sat there, and this presence just kind of overcame me, and I began to weep and laugh kind of simultaneously. And it was just an overwhelming feeling, and as I sat there—I'd say I was there for fifteen minutes or so, and then I heard a voice say, "Everything's going to be okay." And then I felt this presence just leave, like a bird flying away. So, I was just overwhelmed by that, and I felt so refreshed, in some sense, at the same time.

And I went to the class the next day, and I spoke to Flora, the instructor, and I said, "You know, this unusual thing happened to me yesterday, and, you know, what do you make of that?" And she said, "Oh, I've heard that exact experience happen to different people, not often, but occasionally. I think you've been visited by the Holy Spirit." And I said, "Wow." And that became a part of my working lexicon in terms of religious experience, although I know that there have been people who talk about being born again kind of experience they'll claim or name the visit of the Holy Spirit to them.

02-00:04:34

But, anyway, I embraced that experience and really began to look biblically at the texts around the citations of the Holy Spirit. And the one thing that she referred me to was Jesus' baptism, which is told in the gospel accounts, and the presence of the Holy Spirit coming to descend on Jesus and, particularly, the imagery of the dove coming and flying away. And that really stuck with me, especially the departure, the presence kind of flying away like a bird. And so, from that moment on, there was a very distinct feeling about having been visited by the Holy Spirit, but also the Holy Spirit dwelling with me, and also, inspiring me to move forward in this seminary journey.

I was questioning a lot in that first semester whether I belonged there, and I had a lot struggles around the diversity of Christian theology. And at that particular time, the Christian Coalition helped elect Reagan in, I think, 1980 or so, and a lot of theological banter, I think, that made it hard for me to fully embrace the Christian faith.

02-00:06:00

And, yet, having this experience and having that voice come to me saying, "Everything's going to be okay." I think that was a message to me to follow the Spirit and don't worry about all these political or theological debates, and just follow, and everything's going to be okay. I think that was the result of that experience, immediately it compelled me to continue going forward and be open to what was going to take place. And then over the years, it became clear to me that my ministry was very Spirit-centered. I was always very

anchored and grounded in, where was the Spirit? How was the Spirit guiding me? How was the Spirit guiding me and whoever I'm working with, in terms of any kind of form of ministry?

02-00:06:53
Eardley-Pryor: You had shared in the previous interview about your search for Spirit in some ways in mysticism, in song, and other forms of spiritual expression. How was this experience different from those earlier explorations you had?

02-00:07:12
Yoshii: Well, I think all different explorations, I think, have their own validity and efficacy. And I think what this did is it really grounded me in the Christian tradition. I had been led back to the Christian tradition actually by a Sufi teacher who was inviting me to become a Sufi murshid. And then when he realized that I seemed hesitant about that, he redirected me to the faith of my childhood and encouraged me, because I think in his mind, all paths are equally good to be on as long as you're on a path. And so, as he steered me back, that led me, I think, in time, to go to seminary. And I think this experience sort of—I fully embraced being back on that Christian path, and for better or for worse, whatever that meant, and that I had to embraced the totality of Christianity and not just cherry-pick where I wanted to place myself.

02-00:08:20
Eardley-Pryor: Can you share a little bit about your understanding, especially from this emotional, spiritual context of the Trinity itself, and the Holy Spirit versus conceptions of God, in conjunction with notions of Jesus? And how being Spirit-led, as you said, is part of that distinction?

02-00:08:42
Yoshii: Well, for me, the theology of the Holy Trinity is that there are three aspects of God. There's the God, the source, the Creator, we may call the Father or the Parent, where all things come from. And then Jesus is the manifestation of God present in the world, the incarnation of God. So Jesus was God made human. And the Holy Spirit is that sort of three-dimensional presence that activates, animates the spiritual presence. And, the Holy Spirit reveals to us the truth of who Jesus is, and also, the Holy Spirit reveals to us the truth of who God is, and how God has created this world. And also, the Holy Spirit, to me, I like to think of it as the three-dimensional element, breathes breath into the life of our spirituality individually, it breathes life into who we are collectively as people of God, as well. So, to me, it's the animating force, it's the breath of God, and the breath of life.

02-00:09:51
Eardley-Pryor: That's wonderful. As you were in seminary in this time in the early '80s, in some ways really reclaiming your Christian heritage from your youth and what is a family tradition that you learn about later, what are looking for in an institutional sense? I mean, you end up working in the United Methodist

church, but I just don't understand the structures of seminary. Do people come in with a clear sense of, "This is the church I'm going to be part of," or did you know? Were you searching?

02-00:10:23

Yoshii: What I found at seminary was that people were coming from different walks of life and different experiences of calling to come to seminary. And some were coming to get master's degrees to go on to get a PhD and maybe to teach theology, or to teach some aspect of religion. Others were coming specifically because they were feeling called to be pastors. And so, they were coming to get their Master's in Divinity, which is the degree required to become a pastor, and they were in an ordination process.

For me, I had come to the Methodist church because, if you remember, I was doing organizing around the Redress Movement, and I was actually recruiting people through Methodist churches and other churches to try to come and testify at the hearings. And it was through that intersection that I met Methodist pastors and other folks in the Methodist church, and they were beginning to make the invitation for me to consider renewing my faith in Christianity. And it was through recruitment of Methodism where they had an "ethnic church priority," where they were recruiting ethnic persons into seminary education. And I was able to get a scholarship I think through that and through the Methodist church that helped me. Because if I didn't get a scholarship, I wouldn't have gone to seminary because I didn't have the funds to do it. And so, there was that parallel relationship that was building with folks in the Methodist church, and, I think, people who had met me, and who were nurturing me without me even knowing about it. They were looking out for me, and kind of nurturing me along the path.

02-00:12:11

And I think their idea was that I might be good to become a pastor. There were other Japanese American Methodists who I met at seminary who were on that path already to become pastors. I was coming in thinking about social justice ministry. I wanted to explore the intersection of social justice and spirituality and try to find that integration. I can't say in the moment that when I had that experience of the visitation of the Holy Spirit that it convicted me toward the pastoral ministry, but I think it propelled me forward into committing myself to the seminary education. And then, in the process, my being open to becoming a pastor or becoming a Methodist clergy and being appointed in the Methodist church became realized.

02-00:13:07

Eardley-Pryor: I'm curious about the role that place plays in your spiritual search, and in your journey, and searching for a vocation as well. You grew up in Berkeley, you attended schools all the way through college in Berkeley, you were living in the Berkeley area, and then attending seminary in Berkeley. What role do you think having that grounded sense of place, for your whole life in that place, was part of your spiritual search?

02-00:13:37

Yoshii: I don't think being in the Bay Area had a significant impact on that spiritual journey because my spiritual journey was taking me into different places as it was, but I think the familiarity with the community, particularly the Japanese American community, certainly had some influence in my calling. And I was experiencing this, too, in the sense that the other Japanese American students who were there, I heard from them their calling was specifically coming out of the Japanese American context. And I think, for me, that was similar, too. That my calling to seminary was coming out of the context of my being part of Japanese American community, although I hadn't come out of a local church like they did. They all had been members in local Methodist churches and I think they were nurtured through youth programs and things of that nature to develop their spirituality and ultimately their calling. I think I was coming more from a community context of a Japanese American community. But certainly, we were all being called at a particular moment in time in which things were happening to the Japanese American community. And that certainly was the Redress Movement. We were in the middle of the Redress Movement at that particular time. So, that was the contextual part of it.

02-00:15:06

One thing I didn't mention to you before, but one thing comes to mind right now in terms of being in seminary, another memorable experience is I began to ask the question: why do we have ethnic churches? At one point in time, it may have been because I had had this experience in the Holy Spirit that, clearly, I was being affirmed as a child of God. And we're all children of God, so why do we need to separate out into ethnic congregations? And I was driving to a class from Berkeley to San Anselmo because we had the opportunity to take classes at other seminaries, and San Anselmo had the San Francisco Theological Seminary for the Presbyterians, and I was taking a class over there. So, I was driving across to the San Anselmo area, and then when I was coming back—I can't remember the highway that I was on, but it was a big traffic jam. And that question was on my mind that day, I think from a class that I was taking, and I was journaling about what's the efficacy of ethnic congregations? I stopped and I look over, and there was this big open field with these huge trees. And I saw a flock of birds flying and they were making this pattern up in the sky, and it was just beautiful. And because the traffic was stopped, I had the opportunity to watch these birds kind of in their flock. And then as they made their design up in the sky, they all descended into a tree and they disappeared for the moment. And I thought, "Oh. That's the answer."

02-00:16:40

Because they, to me, were symbolizing a congregation. That they're flying on this journey and they fly together because they're birds of a common feather, and here they were descending into the tree. I don't know how long they were going to stop at the tree, but they were kind of gathering together as their community of people. And that's just the way the world is, as well. We have cultures and particular groups that travel together in this world, in this Earthly

journey that we're on. And there are those that have a particular ethnic base of who they are, and that's their community, and there's nothing wrong with it. So, there's nothing to critique about it. It's just to recognize that this is part of the way life manifests itself in human life. And it became sort of a beautiful metaphor to me of why ethnic congregations are vital and important, and, yet, there's a spiritual undergirding that we would bring to those congregations as clergy, as ethnic pastors, that would honor that particular kind of uniqueness that they would have. And as they nestled in that tree, too, you kind of get this feeling like they're gathering together as community, who knows what they're doing in the tree as they're gathering together, but that's congregational life, that would be congregational life; but there's a sense that the group is journeying, and that they're pausing on the journey now and then, as well.

02-00:18:17

So, that became a metaphor for me. And I actually picked up—I can't remember what you call the type of artwork, but it was actually an image of these birds all flying together that somebody gave me somehow, and that became kind of a metaphor for ministry for me when I was actually appointed to a church.

02-00:18:41

Eardley-Pryor: That's a fantastic story. It is a great metaphor, a great parable. As part of your experience of community and a sense of what a congregation is, of course, you're also a member of a family. And you had shared with me that the year after the Holy Spirit visited you, while you were still in seminary, that there was a visit you had with your grandmother in 1985. What was that experience?

02-00:19:04

Yoshii: Well, in 1985 my second daughter was born. My first daughter, Sachi, was born in January of '83, and then Michi was born in February of '85. And my grandmother was sick in hospital, and I wanted to take the kids to meet her. And so, we went to the hospital to see her. And I can't remember all the details of it, but I just do remember that she was asking me what I was doing now, and I told her I was in seminary. And she asked me, "What's a seminary?" And I said, "Well, it's a place where people study religion." And then she had some inkling, "Are you going to become a pastor or what?" And I said, "I'm not sure, but maybe." And she was so very happy that I was studying in seminary, and it was kind of just a really poignant moment.

She passed away later that year, and actually it was on Pearl Harbor Day [December 7] in 1985. And at the funeral, in this particular case, there was like an open casket, and at the very end of the funeral, people were invited to come up to the casket to say our goodbyes and such. And I was kind of in line, and there were maybe three or four people in front of me, and I just broke down. I just fell to the ground, and I was weeping like a baby.

02-00:20:32

And I didn't know what that was all about. And my cousins were like saying, "What's up with you? [laughs] What's going on?" Because I don't think I felt any closer to my grandparents than any of my other cousins. We had lived together across the street, of course, for many years, but I only found out later, when I was in ministry, kind of an explanation of the emotions that I was carrying with my grandmother on that particular day. And that's because I found out through my mother a story that I had never heard before. When they were sent to mass incarceration from Fresno to Jerome, it actually was something she said was a good thing for us, that I had always argued with her about. But the reason why it was good for her was because my grandfather had been a heavy drinker. And when they were on the farm in Fresno, oftentimes he would go off to market and come back and be, sometimes, a little violent. And they would hide my grandmother in a closet, she'd said. And he never harmed her physically, but they were just always scared because he had a temper. But when he went to camp in Jerome, he met a Christian who introduced him to the faith, and from that moment on he stopped drinking. And he became this whole other personality, apparently, and their life was just so much calmer, and peaceful, and better.

02-00:22:08

And it allowed my mom and her sisters and brother to feel a sense of comfort around that, which is why she always said that was the best thing [laughs] for them. It wasn't saying camp itself [laughs] was the best thing, but the change in life was the best thing for them. And I always grew up with the image of my grandparents as always having been Christians for some reason when I was a young child, but that was not part of how the story actually took place. They came to faith in the midst of camp. And that also became a metaphor for me, as well, for ministry. Because what I began to recognize is that their story was how there can be God's grace and redemption and hope in the midst of major crisis and major issues that may go on in people's lives or collective people's lives. There's always that opportunity for God's grace to enter into people's lives, no matter what the circumstances are. And I can say that now, in retirement. I can look back and say, "That's absolutely true." There are good things that can happen to people in the midst of bad things that are going on.

02-00:23:25

Eardley-Pryor: You have this experience at your grandmother's funeral towards the end of—I guess it would have been 1985 or 1986 era. When was it that you learned the story about [your mother's parents?]

02-00:23:38

Yoshii: I didn't learn that story until, I think it was about 1993 or 1994. And it was actually while we were on a trip to Topaz, where my father's family was incarcerated, that my mother told me the story. She actually told me the story while we were on the plane flying to Salt Lake City for the pilgrimage.

02-00:23:59
Eardley-Pryor: Were those pieces of your past coming together sort of making context about this emotional outpouring you had at your grandmother's funeral in that moment?

02-00:24:09
Yoshii: I think the context was we were headed to Topaz because there was a pilgrimage that this group that I was working with called Sansei Legacy, which was kind of doing kind of work around the trauma of the camps. We were part of a group that was helping to facilitate intergenerational dialogue at this particular pilgrimage. And I invited my parents to go on the trip, and they agreed to come. And so, it was in the context of that, where my mom was saying to me—actually she introduced the story by saying, "You know how you always encourage us to tell stories and to share the family history?" That was kind of her set-up of telling me this about the story of my grandfather and my grandmother. So, I think it had taken her some time to even prepare herself to tell me because it was, for her, something she had kind of kept quiet all of her life. And I think her sisters and her brother also had kept quiet, too. So, when she told me that story, then I made the connection to why I had been so emotional when my grandmother had passed away. And this was kind of in the context of us looking at transgenerational impact of trauma, and how particular generations can continue to carry trauma from a previous one or even skip a generation and continue to carry emotional trauma from our ancestors.

02-00:25:55
And I made that connection because we were in the middle of doing that work with Sansei Legacy at that particular point in time. And so, that was a way that the Sansei Legacy Project benefitted me personally in the context that it had opened up conversations in my own family, and, subsequently, my mom then kind of sharing stories that I had never heard. And from that time, I started to tell my cousins about the story, and every one of them were like, "Wow. That's interesting." And then it helped them explain certain things that they had experienced in their lives, too, that started to now make sense. And the other piece around it, too, was—and I had totally forgotten about it, but it was my grandparents who gave me my first Bible at the age of eight. And so, somewhere in this whole process, I went and retrieved that Bible out of the dustbin of storage, and pulled it out. And so, that was a very meaningful piece, too, to know that they had given me my first Bible.

02-00:26:46
Eardley-Pryor: Just hearing that story on pilgrimage in the midst of this intergenerational work that you're doing, both for your family and for the community that you're part of, I imagine it would reframe even your understanding of your Christian identity.

02-00:27:00
Yoshii: Absolutely. Absolutely, because what it demonstrated for me—I mean my grandparents story—was that in some sense it was a conversion for him to come to the faith, and it was a life-changing moment for him embracing the Christian faith. And then it helped me explain why they were such stalwarts at the church that they were involved in post-war. It wasn't like they were strong church people before the war, because they weren't. But they had embraced the faith, and they nurtured that faith apparently while they were in camp because there were worship services in camp, and they continued that after the war. And as they gathered with other Issei, or first-generation folks, at that particular church in Berkeley, the Christian Layman Church, they formed a kind of leadership cadre of that first generation, and they were all lay-people who were running that particular congregation together.

02-00:28:07
Eardley-Pryor: That's great. I want to hear more about your Sansei Legacy Project work, and how that evolved, and what it became, especially for your own journey as well as the community experience. But just to bring back your story in a chronology, is there anything else from seminary that rises up? And then the other question is: when did you finish seminary? What decision did you make by the end of that time as to where you were going to go for your vocation?

02-00:28:32
Yoshii: I finished seminary in 1986, and so I graduated in May of 1986 with my Master's in Divinity. And, I think, the other things I would say that were like highlights of seminary education was getting grounded in the theology of the Holy Spirit. For one, because I had the personal experience, it was important for me to get grounding in that theology. But also, the exposure to liberation theology manifested itself in places like South Africa, Central America, the Philippines. There was a lot of student activism going on at PSR [Pacific School of Religion] at that particular time, and the larger Graduate Theological Union. And so, I think I was getting kind of exposed to a larger consciousness around the role of the church in liberation movements around the world.

02-00:29:24
Eardley-Pryor: What is liberation theology, Michael?

02-00:29:26
Yoshii: Liberation theology is a wedding of Marxist thought with spirituality, and particularly Christianity in this case. So being able to look at social structures and social analysis in what's taking place in particular communities or particular places of oppression that's going on. And understanding that one of the things that Jesus spoke about in Luke chapter 4 is he proclaimed the year of the Lord's favor, which was the jubilee year. The jubilee year in the Old Testament in Leviticus was when all debts were cancelled, when people returned to the land of their homes, where society is made equal once again among all peoples, and structures of oppression are dismantled. And in Luke

4, he proclaims the acceptable year of the Lord, and to set the prisoners free, and to free the captives. And this kind of is a focal scripture for liberation theology. And you contrast that, say, with John 3:16, which is a nice scripture which speaks about— "God so loved the world that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life." To me, that's more about individual salvation. I think Luke 4 proclaims the theology of liberation for all people and recognizing that all people are children of God.

02-00:31:06

So, you see liberation theology being kind of a foundation for church engagement and organizing different movements that are going on around the world. For me, at that particular time, as I mentioned, South Africa was one particular place, and Central America where a lot of liberation theology was born, in Central America, and tying that to the historical civil rights movement and the civil rights theology, as well. I was able to more embrace—I had mentioned earlier in our interview that I did not embrace Martin Luther King so much when I was younger—but I began to embrace his teachings, reading his sermons, and his theology, and understanding his role as a pastor as well as a civil rights leader. It really made a big impression upon me while I was in seminary learning about civil rights theology.

And then my own coming together of the integration of social justice and spirituality for myself personally, and the Japanese American narrative, as well. Where does a Japanese American story fit into the theological enterprise that we were engaged in? And it was clear to me that there's a place for it. There's a place for our narrative. And that made a whole lot of difference for me in seminary education to understand that all of our theology is contextual, and that we bring our experience to the theology that we engage in with colleagues, and wherever that we are headed in terms of ministry. And it was very exciting to see people doing Black theology. James Cone was kind of a forbearer of Black theology and kind of writing their texts around it. And people sharing theology from their own cultural context.

02-00:32:58

Eardley-Pryor: Where was it that you took these new ideas about theology that also match with your own personal experience? Where did that then take you in your vocation at the end, once you earned your Master's in Divinity?

02-00:33:11

Yoshii: Well, there's a parallel process for us in the Methodist Church. That is, there's your education that you're doing, and I was getting my Master's in Divinity and graduated in May of '86, but for those who want to move into ordained ministry, there's a process of ordination. And I had become a candidate in that while I was in seminary, and it was a parallel process for me to be ordained as well. And so, I was ordained, I believe it was June of 1986. And they call it a deacon, that was the first step in your ordination at that particular point in time. And so, ordination took place at what we call our annual conference, where we all assemble together in the conference and, in my case, the

California and Nevada conference. And I was ordained there with several other people who were ordained. And that was a very emotional and very spiritually efficacious experience as well, because you're being blessed by the bishop over that— you know, the laying on the hands of you and others who have been part of your journey stand with you as well as you're being ordained. And it really is very much a ceremonial ritual of your passageway into this vocation. And so, it also plays a large part in kind of shaping that sense of vocational identity, and you're now representing Christ in the world, and you are representing Christ to the Methodist Church, and you're representing Christ in all that you do in ministry. And in our case, as you're open to taking an appointment, the bishop and the cabinet, who are the superintendents, will appoint you to a particular congregation.

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And their authority is that they are able to send you wherever you're needed within the conference. So, it would be possible, as I was being open to being appointed, that I could be sent anywhere within our conference.

02-00:35:18

Eardley-Pryor: Where was your conference?

02-00:35:21

Yoshii: My conference was California and Nevada, and it was Bakersfield and north of that in California, and then all of Nevada. Now, for me, what happened was there were folks—and this interesting, again, because in the Japanese American community there were folks who were identifying needs, and there was a particular superintendent who was working with a pastor in Berkeley that I did an internship with who they arranged for me to be appointed there half-time. And because I had an interest in social justice, the emphasis on the appointment was to do social justice work and to outreach to young families and young adults. And they filled that with another half-time appointment to a church in Alameda called Buena Vista United Methodist, but the primary appointment was to Berkeley.

02-00:36:10

Eardley-Pryor: And how did those experiences go? How did they manifest for you?

02-00:36:14

Yoshii: So, there was appointment change. The pastor who had kind of created the job description for me was sent to another place in southern California, and then a new pastor came in and had to get adjusted to the new congregation. He hadn't really set up this job description for me, and so it became kind of clear that there was sort of a mismatch in the intentions that were set kind of as we went through the first year. And then into the second year, the person who took the church in Alameda was a retired superintendent, and he told me, "I think you should come over here and become the pastor. It would be good for you because you need experience being a solo pastor. As far as your social justice work goes, you'll understand better how to do social justice if you're the solo

pastor in charge. And they also need somebody there, and you need to think about that." They were a smaller congregation, more aging than the Berkeley one. And he said, "We need to think about what they need also, and they need somebody." He had been retired, and he was doing this out of support for them. And so, Suzanne and I prayed about it, and it became clear that that was the move for us to make. And I didn't know much about Alameda at the time. Even though I was from the Bay Area, I had never spent much time in Alameda, but we agreed to make the move.

02-00:36:14
Eardley-Pryor: So you moved to Alameda to be—

02-00:37:43
Yoshii: Well, actually, no. We didn't physically move. We were living in El Cerrito at the time, so actually I was commuting. When I said we agreed to make the move, we agreed to the appointment change. But actually, my kids stayed at the Berkeley church and Suzanne stayed there, too, as I was assigned to Alameda. They would come with me every once in a while. But because they were connected there at that [Berkeley] congregation, they stayed there. And then also, we lived in El Cerrito, so it was closer to them to go to Berkeley.

02-00:38:18
Eardley-Pryor: What was the church in Alameda that you went to?

02-00:38:21
Yoshii: Buena Vista United Methodist. And they, like the Berkeley church, were historically Japanese American congregations. They had served Japanese Americans from the late nineteenth century. Buena Vista was started in 1898, and was formed to serve immigrants from Japan who were coming into that particular community.

02-00:38:48
Eardley-Pryor: Wow. So, it had been around for almost 100 years by that time, mostly for Japanese Americans, by the time you became the leader?

02-00:38:56
Yoshii: Yeah. It was about ninety years when I came there as the solo pastor in 1988. So, that would have been ninety years. Yeah.

02-00:39:06
Eardley-Pryor: Wow. What was your experience coming into this, as you said, an older Japanese American congregation? So, I'm assuming that's Issei and Nisei who would still be there. What was your own experience and your own personal journey by joining and becoming a leader of this older Japanese American congregation?

02-00:39:26
Yoshii: Well, it was exciting on the one hand, and then it was really anxious on the other. I mean, for me to become the pastor I think was this whole totally new experience for me, and to step into that role and to embrace—it was a learning

curve for me, and coming to a community that I didn't know much about. But it was also interesting at the same time, because being Japanese American, as I was meeting people there, there would be connections that we would make between families I knew growing up and just different things that I was engaged in as I was younger. And then getting to know people's stories and their own particular community in Alameda, I really began to learn very quickly that Alameda had a unique Japanese American community. The Buddhist temple was right across the street, and so there was a very close relationship between the Buddhist temple and the Methodist community. And there's just kind of a unique nature of Alameda itself.

02-00:40:30
Eardley-Pryor: What do you mean?

02-00:40:31
Yoshii: As an island community.

02-00:40:37
Eardley-Pryor: I'm conscious that 1988 as you joined Buena Vista, is also the year the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 was passed and surprisingly signed by Ronald Reagan. What are your memories and experiences in conjunction with that?

02-00:40:50
Yoshii: Right. So, I had started at the church in July, and then they were engaged with a youth retreat called a Lake Sequoia Retreat. And so, I went as the—I think I was asked to be the minister advisor for the camp that year. And we had a couple of youth that were involved in the camp. And so, it was during August that the Civil Liberties Act was announced, it was actually on my birthday [August 10] that it was announced, and we were able to have my birthday celebration and a civil liberties celebration at the same time at the camp. And it was just really exciting news to hear, you can imagine.

And I think when I came back, I told the congregation, "We should have some kind of celebration of this act being passed." And one of the members said, "Let's talk to a [city] council member about it." And we had the meeting, and I told the council member about what had happened, about this apology being issued, and that we should have a community event to commemorate the passage of the act. And he said to me [laughs], "No, we don't do stuff like that in Alameda." And I said, "What do you mean? Stuff like what?" And he said, "These kind of things." And so, I got the picture of—Alameda was a much more conservative community than, say, Berkeley was. And in fact, I would hear that now and then that, "We don't do these kind of things. That's stuff people in Berkeley would do." And I would kind of joke with them because I'd say, "Well, actually I'm from Berkeley. I was born and raised in Berkeley [laughs]. So maybe that's why it seems off-kilter to me that you wouldn't consider this." But it helped me understand—

02-00:42:30
Eardley-Pryor: When you say council—I'm sorry [for interrupting you]. When you say council member, what do you mean?

02-00:42:35
Yoshii: City council.

02-00:42:37
Eardley-Pryor: City council in Alameda?

02-00:42:38
Yoshii: Yep. Yeah.

02-00:42:40
Eardley-Pryor: And they were the ones saying, "This is not what we do here."

02-00:42:42
Yoshii: Yeah, "No, we wouldn't do something like that." Yeah.

02-00:42:44
Eardley-Pryor: Where did that go with your intention to have a celebration?

02-00:42:47
Yoshii: Well, what he did—so he made a compromise. I guess being a good politician, he said, "What I would do is I would help support a commemoration of your ATK baseball team," which was a segregated Japanese American baseball team that played in a segregated Japanese baseball league prior to the war. [ATK stood for the Alameda Taiku Kai, the Alameda Athletic Club.] And, actually, there were people kind of excited about that idea because there were folks who were still in the congregation who played for the team in Alameda and played in that league. And so there just a lot of energy that got unleashed around that. So, people organized a commemoration of the ATK baseball team, and then they had a special event at the park where they used to play, and there was a dedication of a rock with a plaque on it, as well. And it was a lot of fun, it was very interesting. And it was kind of, again, like a—I think I talked about sports in my own life, kind of a revisitation of the role of sports in the community's life. It was a lot of good energy they had about having a reunion of all their players. And I think there was actually kind of a successive thing that started to happen, where people were having these reunions of these sports teams in different Japanese American communities.

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And I can't remember the guy's name, but there was a guy from Fresno who was organizing all these reunions and gatherings of commemoration of the baseball players—and they actually went so far at one point as to have a commemoration at Candlestick Park—I think it was Candlestick, or was it AT&T Park? I don't know, but it was where the Giants played. They actually had all the old timer Japanese American baseball players come there, and I think I remember it right, it's not my imagination, that there were some of

them out at centerfield or something for a ceremony. And they were playing off of that old movie where they talk about, "If you build it, they will come."

02-00:44:53
Eardley-Pryor: Oh, *Field of Dreams*.

02-00:44:54
Yoshii: *Field of Dreams*, yeah. Very surrealistic feeling around all that. But anyway, it kind of tells you the role of sports that was prominent in the community.

02-00:45:06
Eardley-Pryor: How else did the 1988 civil rights legislation that enabled redress to begin, for the process to begin formally, and the federal formal apology from the United States government, how did that play out within the community?

02-00:45:26
Yoshii: Well, although I had testified at the [Redress] hearings and I was working with folks organizing others to bring people to the hearings, there were a lot of people that didn't come to the hearings, and a lot of people that never told their stories. And I think the passage of the Civil Liberties Act also gave legitimacy to people telling their stories. And I think the way it impacted the life of the congregation, as I began to serve there, is we began to have our own Day of Remembrance service as a worship service, and invite people to come and tell their own stories, things that maybe they hadn't shared before even to their families or to the community. Because it was clear that many people held on to stories and had held them within themselves for forty-some-odd years. And now was an opportunity for that storytelling to take place at a whole other level. And you started to see the proliferation of history projects, oral history things going on—this oral history project [laughs] now, in what, 2022—there was a lot of stuff that was started back then in the early '90s or so, I'd say. And there was a lot of people being interviewed and being asked to tell their stories.

02-00:46:41
Eardley-Pryor: How did you, as the pastor, bring your practice as a Christian into this experience of storytelling and remembering the past trauma?

02-00:46:55
Yoshii: I think it played out in all areas of life in the congregation. So like for example, in worship it would affect my preaching because, as I preach contextually out of what's going on in the world, certainly this particular event in the life of the history of Japanese Americans was a major, major event. And so, it might be in the content of my preaching, it might be in the way we're curating worship itself, the songs we sing, how we sing them, and things of that nature. It would affect how we were doing things in Bible study. Because as we're reading the Bible, again, as you're contextualizing your study, I'm inviting people to bring their own experiences into the reading of the biblical text. And oftentimes that would be a space, like in a Bible study would be a space where people are bringing up stories that maybe they had not told

before to anyone, saying, "Here's something that happened in my life." And how does the scripture text relate to this particular moral dilemma or ethical dilemma that we had faced in a particular time in our lives? It kind of applied to other aspects of the congregational life as well.

02-00:48:18

We had something called the Spring Festival Bazaar, it was called a bazaar, but these are like annual kind of—people saw them as fundraising events. And in our case, we were selling chicken teriyaki boxed-lunches. And at this particular event, I remember at the congregation I was serving, people were getting tired of doing the event, and they were feeling tapped-out in terms of physical energy and stuff. And I happened to go to the conference in the Philippines sponsored by the Pacific Asian Center for Theology and Strategies, and they were looking at festivals as a theological theme. And I wrote a paper around this particular bazaar event being akin to the matsuri tradition in Japan. It's like a festival event, to me, where the whole community comes together to work on a particular thing together, and to build up the life of the community, and—

02-00:49:33

Eardley-Pryor: Wait, this is what matsuri is?

02-00:49:35

Yoshii: Well, matsuri is like festival tradition in Japan. So, there's matsuris for different occasions of the year. So, there might be a matsuri for like Boy's Day, there will matsuris for different particular occasions like Obon festivals. And what I was getting at was that it felt to me like this bazaar itself was like a festival event. We didn't call it a festival, we called it a bazaar, and that's because there were things being sold, and there were like food being sold and all this, but it was a coming together of community. And it was a place where you saw people you didn't see on Sunday morning. It was like everybody who was connected to the community would come together.

And then what I realized about it was that this event was kind of a coming out of the community after the war, they started it in the late '50s. And other Christian churches were also starting these kind of events as well, and Buddhist temples were also having their kinds of bazaar festivals. And so, there was kind of multiple functions for this kind of event. One was the fundraising because they were raising some funds for the church, but it was also to celebrate the culture. And I learned that at Buena Vista, the first event they did was actually a Girl's Day, it was a Hinamatsuri event. And so, they were celebrating Girl's Day and people were bringing their doll collections to exhibit, and they were doing it for the community as well. So, it was a way of bringing back their culture to the community after having this long hiatus. And in this particular case, the church had been closed from '42 to '45 when they all departed to Topaz and other places. So, when they came back and reopened the church, it took them some time to kind of have an opportunity to come back out to the community, so to speak.

02-00:51:41

And so long story short, what I was looking at was that historically this event was a coming out again to the community. But it was also supported by other Japanese Americans because they had this tradition of the communities going to each other's bazaars, because they were supporting each other economically and financially by having that kind of network of support with one another as well as the larger community that would come to particular events. So, there was a historical element of it. There was the cultural element of it that I was trying to identify spiritually, and then I think there was this other element of it in that particular moment in time where we were revisiting our Japanese American history, our identity.

02-00:52:37

And so, one of the things we began to do—we continued the event, and we began to highlight the history of the church at the event by having historical exhibits of photo exhibits of the history. And I think at one time it morphed into like even exhibiting memorabilia from camp, so it began to be an opportunity to show to the public the history of the mass incarceration. And there were members of the church who had things that they had brought back like wood carvings, and paintings, and craft items that they built in camp. And so, there were members that organized bringing those items out and displaying them. And so, in a way it's like recognizing the history from within the community, but it's also educating the outside community on things that went on during that particular time. And I think they continued that tradition year after year to show the history exhibit, and then bring things out, or have special programs. And by the time—I'd say the later years that I was there, they actually had special programs at the church commemorating the Executive Order 9066 and have panel discussions, or we would show films at the event that captured some of the history, or also looked at the intersection of the issues of injustice done to Japanese Americans, and the issues that the church was working on at that particular time. So at the bazaar event, we might have a panel talking about the work that we were doing on immigration, for example, and have people sharing about the connection it had to Japanese American history.

02-00:54:30

Eardley-Pryor: Well, that sounds incredible. You'd mentioned that a number of the congregants had connections to Topaz, the same way that you, through your father, have a connection to Topaz. Was that where the majority of the community that had been incarcerated, was that where they went?

02-00:54:46

Yoshii: Yeah. The majority of this particular—the folks at Buena Vista went to Topaz. Not everybody, some left before camp and went to different places across the country. But the majority did go to Topaz, so there was a sense of collective destination there. And it was the site for the Bay Area for I think San Francisco and other parts of the East Bay. My parents were in Oakland and that's why they were sent to Topaz, as well. So, in fact, the connection I had

serving this congregation was that there were a few people there who knew my grandparents and my father because they were both at Topaz together. And so, there were family connections that I discovered. And that's where also for me personally, although I'm the pastor of the church, I was also still learning about our history, too. As I was learning history from members of the congregation, I would learn these things about family connections that were made at that particular point in time. And then in my head I'd go, "Oh, that's why we know so and so," [laughs] you know?

02-00:55:49
Eardley-Pryor: Wow. Wow. I'm wondering what happened to these artifacts, as well? The heirlooms that people had kept from the time of the mass detentions that then they were displaying during these recreations of matsuris, the festival bazaars on the days—

02-00:56:07
Yoshii: I think some families have kept some of their valuable things, and others have donated them to different places. I know that the Oakland Asian Cultural Center did have an exhibit at one point showing a lot of these kinds of artifacts. And I don't know if they returned them to families or what, but I remember going to see the exhibit because a couple of our members said they were going to have some things exhibited there at the cultural center.

02-00:56:35
Eardley-Pryor: You had mentioned to me—there was some story in connection to these festivals where you mentioned that there was food being sold, and there was some story about chicken teriyaki. What is that story?

02-00:56:45
Yoshii: Oh, [laughs] yeah. This is really a funny story. So, there was a man at the church who started the chicken teriyaki item to be sold. The first year they had the Hinamatsuri festival, and they didn't sell a whole lot of food, they sold some foods. But this man had a friend in Watsonville who told him, "I have a great chicken teriyaki recipe, and the white mainstream folks will love it if you cook this, and they'll come and buy it from you." And so, he tried the teriyaki recipe the second year, and I think he said he made maybe about 200 box lunches or so. And sure enough, they're barbecuing early in the morning, people in the neighborhood could smell it, and they'd come. And so, he started with 200 one year, and I think he said it just doubled or tripled, and by the time I was there, they were doing like 1,200 boxes or so. But anyway, I wrote about how, to me, the important thing to understand about the Japanese American community is the interfaith relationships, and his friend was from the Watsonville Buddhist temple. And I don't know for sure, but I think they met in camp or they may have had a relationship before camp, but it shows you kind of the support and solidarity people have after camp that he was telling him, "Try this out." And so, I wrote about that in an article that I wrote saying that we were indebted to the Buddhist community in Watsonville for this recipe.

02-00:58:28

And then the next year when we had the event, I was back at the barbecue pit, and a guy comes up to me and said, "Are you the pastor?" And I said, "Yes." And he said, "I read the article you wrote. It's really good, but you made a mistake." And I said, "What was the mistake?" And he says, "I'm from Sebastopol, I'm from the Sebastopol Buddhist temple, and our recipe came first. We gave it to Watsonville, and so you're indebted to us." And I said, "Oh, okay." And we had a good laugh about it. But I remember as a young person I had gone out to Sebastopol to their big festival bazaar and they served many, many more chicken teriyaki boxes and so forth. But then it made sense to me. So as far north as Sebastopol, as far south as Watsonville, this recipe was being circulated. Everybody they thought they had the best recipe, right? Of course.

02-00:59:23

Eardley-Pryor: That's pretty amazing to have those kind of deep connections that spread across such a big geography throughout northern California, but still intimately connected and supporting one another.

02-00:59:33

Yoshii: And to me that told me how important it was for, particularly, the Nisei generation to stay connected after war time as they were trying to get re-established, and as they were having their kids, and as they were trying to deal with economic sustainability. They were all supporting each other. I mean, again, as far north as Sebastopol, as far south as Watsonville, and the Bay Area congregation as well, and Buddhists and Christians alike, and different areas and regions.

02-01:00:06

Eardley-Pryor: There's another story you mentioned I think in the context of creating more of an impact on the Day of Remembrance and commemorating the Executive Order 9066 that involved some sort of stones, like a talking stone that then somehow connects back to your own experience?

02-01:00:25

Yoshii: When I was at the Berkeley church, there was a man there who was in Topaz, and he saw my interest in the history of the internment camps, and he said he had some rocks from Topaz. He was a rock collector, and so he brought them back with him from Topaz, although he said he wasn't supposed to. So he had a whole bunch of rocks, he had rocks from around the world, from wherever he traveled, but he gave me about a dozen or so of these rocks. And they became kind of very symbolic for me because I just imagined, these were actually there on the grounds of where my grandparents lived for four years. And you hold them, and you can just kind of feel the energy.

And so, as I did a Day of Remembrance worship service at Buena Vista, or I would also be involved with other groups doing story-telling events for Japanese Americans in different spaces, I would use the rocks as a talking

stone. And I would invite people to hold the stone, particularly if they were from Topaz, to hold the stone, to remember the place that they were at, the ground that they stood under, and the energy that they felt from that historical space, and then to be able to tell their story.

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And so, I did that in the church when we had Day of Remembrance, I introduced the rocks. And there's a scripture story in Luke, I believe it's Luke 19, where Jesus speaks about—I think the Pharisees are telling him to quiet the crowd down because people are upset about certain things that are going on in their living under the Roman occupation. And he says, "If the people are silent, these stones will cry out," as he points to the ground. And so, I would use that scripture as an anchor to also say that, "If you don't want to say anything, the stones will speak for you, but you can speak for yourself holding the stones." And that became kind of a symbolic gesture. And you know, in story-telling, too, I think a lot of people are using story objects to be able to help people ground themselves. And so anyway, I've used that since, and I still have the rocks.

And I actually participated in a Day of Remembrance at San Francisco State last year on 9066 and I brought the rocks there. And it was a whole different generation, because it was like a new generation of student leaders there that were doing the Day of Remembrance. But I invited them to hold the rock as they participated in the ceremonies there that they were organizing.

02-01:03:20

Eardley-Pryor: Your consciousness of the intergenerational importance of story-telling and creating a space for those individuals to share their experiences that echo throughout the community and throughout their family lives is really, really powerful. Where did you get this sense of the importance of the intergenerational aspects?

02-01:03:44

Yoshii: I think some of that began in seminary. There was a colleague named Diana Akiyama who was an Episcopalian student. We had conversations about feeling like we had been impacted by the internment even though we weren't there ourselves. And I can't remember where it was, but I came across an article—I think it was printed in a Japanese American Citizens League newspaper, by a woman named Nobu Miyoshi. She was a retired social worker, and she was working on this notion of intergenerational trauma, and trauma being passed from generation to generation. She had worked with Jewish Holocaust survivors, apparently, with a colleague, and she herself being a Nisei, was intrigued about kind of the ways in which emotional trauma lived in Japanese American psyches, and in families, and so forth. And so, she wrote an article which really gripped me, and I had put that away for a while, and then—oh, I take that back. When I was doing work with the folks organizing for the redress hearings, we were talking about bringing people out

to tell their stories, but we were also recognizing at that particular time how difficult it was for people.

02-01:05:04

And so, I think that was the first inkling I was getting about we had to be respectful of the trauma that people carried with them. Even though they hadn't talked about things, it wasn't like they could just immediately open the door to these conversations. And in fact, a lot of people said, "Be very careful about when you ask people to come and tell a story, because there could be a lot of emotional content that people are carrying that's very painful." And so, I was mindful of that at that particular time. And just along the way, different things would help inform that kind of sensibility.

I believe it was actually when the [redress] checks and the letters of apology started coming in the mail, I would notice some member's different reactions to getting them. And it wasn't like a universal experience of everybody was overjoyed getting their checks and getting those apologies. Some couldn't believe they were getting it. Then I began to realize that these letters actually could be a trigger for the trauma that people were holding. And that, in fact, when we understand post-traumatic stress disorder, and that people had been holding a collective trauma or their own individual or family traumas, then different things can become a trigger to open that up, or become triggers in sort of, you know, raising one's awareness and consciousness about things that are still kind of underneath the surface of a person's own psyches.

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And so, I think with that I actually held a series on post-traumatic stress disorder, where I set up a series of sermons where I wanted to talk about it, and have workshops after worship in which we could explore the dimensions of how we may have been holding trauma in our lives, and also, what the implications could be transgenerationally or intergenerationally.

02-01:07:12

Eardley-Pryor: And it was the redress letters that helped spur your recognition of this?

02-01:07:17

Yoshii: Yeah, I think that was kind of a key piece because I did notice that there was not a universal response to letters, where you might think that everybody would just be rejoicing when they got the letters. But that wasn't the case.

02-01:07:30

Eardley-Pryor: What came out of the collection of sermons and workshops around post-traumatic stress?

02-01:07:35

Yoshii: It kind of got turned sideways because there were some people visiting who came with different experiences, not Japanese Americans, who were visiting the congregation, who asked if they could sit in on the workshops. And I said, "Sure, I mean, everybody's welcome." But I think what happened was there

were different folks who began attending that, and it started to divert from the Japanese American-centric focus that I was intending. And I always I learned in doing ministry that the Holy Spirit will surprise you with new things, that you may plan one thing, but it ends up going in another direction. And that was the case. There was a Jewish Holocaust survivor there in the group, there was somebody who had had sexual trauma from childhood—who were not Japanese Americans. There were a couple Japanese Americans who were attending, Sansei, who were very interested in the Japanese American aspect, but there was another Caucasian person and another Japanese American who began to be kind of more of the focal point of the workshops. And many of the Nisei who were coming, they came, but then they could see other people were attending [laughs]. After that, I started a support group called "Wounded Healers" based on Henri Nouwen's book at that particular time, that spoke about kind of the healing elements in our Christian sensibility, and kind of create space for that. [Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Wounded Healer: Ministry in Contemporary Society* (1979).]

02-01:09:08

Yoshii: And so, that support group went on for some time, but I was recognizing that it was moving away from the Japanese American-centric focus. And a couple of the Sansei who were involved, they wanted to get back to this idea of the Japanese American intergenerational relatedness, and trauma, and so forth. And that spurred on our convening of the Sansei Legacy Project, where we did an intentional convening of Sansei. And I called up my friend Diana [Akiyama] and asked if she would like to collaborate. She was at Stanford at that particular point in time. And we had our own invitation list. We just sent out an invitation and used Buena Vista as the host congregation. And so, it was more of a community convening of Sansei who were interested in exploring this topic of intergenerational trauma. And we had about seventy names that we put invitations to, and about thirty to thirty-five people showed up.

And the first gathering was just very powerful because we sat in the social hall around a circle, and just asked people to introduce themselves and share a little bit about their story, why they were here. And the whole time—I think we convened for two hours or so—the whole time was just taken just by the introductions. And it was clear that there was such strong energy around people wanting to explore this for themselves individually, but also that there was a collective dynamic going on here, that we were on to something.

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And so, out of that first convening, we said, "Let's do this monthly." And we started to do that once a month. And, eventually, we got some funding to staff it. And a woman named Jill Shiraki came from Southern Cal who was very interested in the subject, and she became the coordinator of the project. And later, she brought on a woman named Audrey Shoji who also became a coordinator. And they really took it to another level in terms of the whole

monthly convenings, and we had a smaller support group as well. But I had to kind of return my attention to our congregational life because there were some people coming who were finding our church, but this really wasn't a church program, per se, we were just hosting it there. And I needed to turn my attention back to kind of the needs of our own congregation.

02-01:11:40
Eardley-Pryor: I'm curious about the ways that the Sansei Legacy Project emerged from initial lectures and sermons around post-traumatic stress, and then you mentioned this book and this group called Wounded Healers. I'm wondering about the role that healing played as an intention within this formation of what became Sansei Legacy, and these other parts that were more congregationally oriented. What was the role that healing played in this?

02-01:12:10
Yoshii: Well, it was very clear to me that healing was the objective. We were looking for healing. The idea of talking about trauma would—hold on a second, I'm getting something coming up on my screen.

02-01:12:26
Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, I'll just pause.

02-01:12:27
Yoshii: Okay.

[pause in recording]

02-01:12:31
Yoshii: Well, clearly when we're talking about trauma and exploring what are the dimensions of trauma that we may be carrying with us. The implicit intention is to move toward healing if we're carrying some painful experiences. So, I think that was implicit in us convening that particular group with the Sansei Legacy folks. And looking at "what makes for healing?" I think also was a key question. I found that to be really fascinating, too. Because it was clear as we were gathering, people were naming the pain that they were experiencing in their lives, but the question about what would make for healing is a really important point. What are the ways in which healing can be effective? And we were very open to being very eclectic about how we do this. I mean, we weren't trying to be therapists. And of course, we were convening this as clergy persons with kind of an implicit understanding that there is healing grace within faith, but we were also not wanting to be explicitly Christian with this because we knew that this was not a Christian issue, this was a community issue.

And one of the things I always understood and learned is that in the congregational life and in the life of a pastor or clergy, we always have the power to convene. We have a space, and we can convene. And that doesn't cost anybody any money. We're just using the space or making good use of that. And so, we're convening people to come together.

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And I think we also had this sort of spirit that there's wisdom in the group, that if we can open ourselves up to allowing people to share their insights about what's helping, then we can create healing space, and safe space, and allow for people to name things that are helping them along the way. And I think that's why we were open to different ways of doing things and convenings. And so, I think people would make suggestions: "Well, let's have artists come in and share what they're experiencing through their artwork." Or we had a playwright come in once and talk about his play about a Japanese American family where there were themes there around these kinds of emotional gaps between family members and very prominent in the script of the play. And he would talk about how he came up with that whole story and—

02-01:15:06

Eardley-Pryor: Do you remember the name of that playwright or the play?

02-01:15:08

Yoshii: I think that was Philip Gotanda with *Fish Head Soup*. And then there was people that were researching the subject that—I remember, she was an academic, Donna Nagata. I can't remember where she was at, but—

02-01:15:21

Eardley-Pryor: I think she's at [the University of] Michigan.

02-01:15:23

Yoshii: But, anyways, we flew her out to talk about her work as an academic. And she was researching, I think, Sansei and intergenerational trauma and stuff. And I'm sure some of the folks from the [Sansei] Legacy Project became subjects of her research project. I don't remember for sure, but—so we had different kinds of things going on which I think gave it a really good dynamic that it wasn't focused on a particular approach, but kind of open to different ways of exploring what would make for healing.

And for me, what clearly became evident as a pastor, as a clergy person, the congregational life is the base of where my healing work would happen. I could do healing work in the community, but the congregational space would be the place where the healing would be effectuated most dynamically for me as a clergy. It didn't mean I was speaking for anybody else, because I can see that there were therapists who that's the path they were taking, and they were doing healing work with Japanese Americans in their own practice or with their own cohort of folks. And there were people that were doing healing work in the arts, and that's the way that they were kind of carrying forward that intentionality. But for me, as a clergy, it was the congregational life, and that includes things like your preaching, and your worship, and your biblical studies, and everything—the social life of the congregation. All of that kind of combines into kind of a holistic community of healing.

02-01:16:59

And that very much, I think, would become a theme for me as congregational leader, to effectuate the intentionality of healing. And also, it becomes clear at a certain point along the way, too, that while we were focusing on healing for Japanese Americans, that the theme of healing is there universally for anyone who comes to the congregation. And I think you began to find that taking place, that people would find our congregation because they found it as safe healing space spiritually, and for their own things that they might be bringing from their lives into the space.

02-01:17:43

Eardley-Pryor: You'd mentioned the Wounded Healers group, how a lot of what this emerged out of was, in some ways, influenced by Henri Nouwen, a Catholic priest. It makes me wonder about what other resources you were drawing on, particularly in the congregational work with your vocational hat on as the pastor. Were there different kinds of resources that you incorporate in this journey towards healing that might be different from the one that includes artists and scholars coming in to give talks?

02-01:18:15

Yoshii: Well, as I said, I think within the life of the congregation, I began to recognize that everything we do is part of our healing. As a Methodist clergy, the primary things that I am responsible for are the administration of the sacraments, that's the Sacrament of Baptism and Holy Communion. And Holy Communion itself is a very healing liturgy, it's a healing ceremony, it's a remembrance about the life of Jesus, and a commemoration of his last supper with his disciples, but it was also, in many respects, a celebration of his resurrection. And so, there's a symbolism for the bread and the cup, and there's kind of a redemptive story within the facilitation of the sacrament. And at the same time, there's a real mystery around how it works as a spiritual sacrament.

I remember when I was in seminary, I didn't mention this before in the seminary highlights, but when I was very focused on discovering more about the Holy Spirit, it was a Catholic priest in the Jesuits named Father [Donald L.] Gelpi who had had his own experience of an encounter with the Holy Spirit. He wrote a book on the theology of the Holy Spirit, and I took his course, but he also had a charismatic prayer group that he had. And he would have guitars, singing, and prayer, and so forth, but he would also end the session with Holy Communion. And I remember very vividly being in one of the sessions with him where the prayers went on, and then he ended with Holy Communion, and as he administered the elements, I just felt myself being transported like in a time capsule back as though I was there present with Jesus and his disciples at their meal, and then being transported back to the present reality.

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But in the process of it, kind of the mysterious feeling of grace and healing that was going on as well, that there was something that was so mysterious about it. And, to me, that's such a privilege as a Methodist pastor to be able to administer the sacrament of Holy Communion, and it's central to what our responsibilities are. And so, I guess the point I'm trying to make around that is Holy Communion is a Christian sacrament that contains healing elements in it, that it's very hard to describe what it's like, but I think people experience it in many different ways. So, that's central to the communion service, and worship every week, and how you preach and what you preach about, including the prayers that you are saying in the worship service. To me, prayer time goes very deep, and prayer time always and often include the prayers for healing around different things that people are going through personally, or with families, and even social justice issues that are going on in the world. And the prayer life, I think, is a very, very deep source of healing for many.

02-01:21:36

Eardley-Pryor: That's great.

02-01:21:37

Yoshii: But I would say it's the totality of life within the life of the congregation. And even social events can be healing. Let's consider, for example, people that are going through the grieving of losing a loved one, and being very alone and lost, but being a part of a community can be very healing, to be able to be at a social event with the congregation. It could be a simple lunch, it could be a fundraiser, but just being able to participate and be part of things takes you out of your isolation. And we cannot estimate what the measure of healing is for that person, but I know that that's truly part of the life of a congregation. There can be different things that add healing to one's life.

02-01:22:26

Eardley-Pryor: I think that's wonderful reflections on that. And throughout this—

02-01:22:31

Yoshii: Let me say one other thing, too.

02-01:22:33

Eardley-Pryor: Please, please.

02-01:22:34

Yoshii: And I believe, too, that as we pivoted toward doing other social justice work and community organizing, I believe that adds to the healing. It certainly has been part of my personal experience, that as we engage in healing for other communities. And as we engage in empowerment for other communities, and as we engage in raising the banner of justice for other communities, we are also engaging in our own healing, our own healing is being played forward. And that's where, I believe, the intersectionality between the Japanese American narrative and the injustices that were done to us, when we are engaged in healing for other communities who have yet to receive their day of

justice, then there's healing that's going on in the intersectional solidarity that goes on.

02-01:23:25

Eardley-Pryor: That's awesome. I wanted to ask you about your own personal experience in this. In this narrative you've shared in your oral history, it's your narrative, it's your story, even though your role is often very much in service to community, service to your congregation, but it's your experience through that. And so, I want to bring it back to this pilgrimage experience that you shared. You traveled to Topaz as a part of your own healing journey, also as a member of this community that you are a part of within the Sansei Legacy Project. Can you share a little bit about what it meant to be going to that place, to actually be at camp?

02-01:24:05

Yoshii: You know, to be honest, at that particular event, because I was involved in helping to organize certain things, it felt different than if I was just to go on a pilgrimage and just be there. It was hard to just be, because I was in the role of facilitating. Of course, that was the historical site where my grandparents were and my father was. And because my father and mother were with us at the time, we were able to talk more in depth about things, and visit the site of where the barracks were, and so forth. But to tell you the truth, because I was so busy with helping, with organizing of things, I would say on that particular visit, it was harder for me to be present with things that would be more healing for me.

But we did take a trip to Topaz that the congregation sponsored. It was sponsored by some young people, particular youth of the congregation, in 2019, which is many years later after I had originally gone. And that trip was much more—maybe healing is the word, but it's also maybe meaningful, I think, because youth were organizing and I didn't have to do as much organizing there. I just was present as a pastor would be with the folks there. And my father came, and I think, at his age, I think at that time he was about ninety-seven or so.

02-01:25:41

My daughter came, and she was the one who wanted to bring my father. And she brought a filmmaker along with him, too. We were able to have much more just regular space and time to just explore things, and I think that trip was really much more meaningful. And maybe it was meaningful in way, too, because I was coming toward the end of my time as a pastor before I retired, so, it was kind of a look back on things, as well. And maybe because of the age of my father, too. And I know this, my father really enjoyed the 2019 trip. We didn't have a chance that trip in the '90s, we didn't have a chance so much to talk about as much as did on this particular one, but I felt from him how much more he enjoyed this one. And maybe it's also because at that particular trip he took with my mother, they were also opening up new stories for me which maybe were more painful at the time. I don't know, but it's clear at that

time my mother was sharing a story with me that had not been told. And so, there was a lot more maybe awkwardness around what they wanted to talk about or what they could talk about. And now years later, there was a different kind of retrospective feeling.

02-01:27:07

Eardley-Pryor: Hearing you talk about this experience with your parents, on both occasions, including on this 2019 trip and having your daughter be a part of it, makes me wonder about your role as a father in sharing your family's experience with your own children. When did you talk with them about the family trauma of incarceration, and their relationship to it, and how that might be passed down to them?

02-01:27:36

Yoshii: It's interesting because, I think, because they grew up at the church and we were doing a lot of storytelling at the church, I think they got that by osmosis of being part of the congregation. And I didn't grow up there, but that's where they grew up. So I think they have memories of growing up in that particular community, with certain families, and kind of the sense that that was their extended Japanese American community that they had that I didn't have growing up. I had a different experience growing up. So, I think they heard stories, plenty of stories from the congregation, that I didn't have to tell them. But when they would ask, I would tell them about our own family story as well. But I think like a lot of folks who do this kind of work where we're telling stories a lot, they probably get tired of hearing my stories. I'm their father, right? I'm not the same as for other people where I'm their pastor and they're glued to listening to me in a different way. So, that's my sense of it.

And then they've taken their own course in terms of how they appropriate that narrative for their own lives. But I know that Sachi had taken that strong interest with things particularly related to Topaz in a way that she galvanized the energy to hire this filmmaker. She saw the moment, this is a great moment to capture my father on film, and to capture him on film with me. And so for that, I'm grateful. She's been very involved, too, I think in the work that she does in support of Arab and South Asian communities. She's in philanthropy, and has developed ways to share the narrative in ways that are able to make a difference for different communities of color. So, I know that that's been appropriated very well, so that she's absorbed both the family story and the larger narrative, as well.

02-01:29:48

Also, the other thing, too, I think this has happened more in—I'd say more recent years, because my father talks about it a lot more, how he grew up in Oakland and his father had a restaurant that they lost during the war. And my father talks about that a lot even to this day. When we ask him about his thoughts about past and memories, a lot of it goes back to that period which was in his teens and then he was twenty-one when the 9066 happened. But [in his teens], they were very memorable years of good life as he recalls it. And

so, I think there's been interest in my family about that particular piece of history because that sort of restaurant entrepreneurship maybe is something that is interesting in our family to kind of look back on. And we have found some documents around where the restaurant was located. We've known anecdotally because I've taken my father back there, we've driven there and kind of seen the site of where the thing was. But we've actually had some maps now identify the actual location.

02-01:31:01

Eardley-Pryor: You're talking about these stories that are family-oriented, yet they're also community-oriented. I'm curious about this dialectic that you're sharing between your individual experience as a son and as a father, and then also as a pastor with regard to this broader community experience, both the Japanese American community and then just the Alameda community more broadly even. And I'm wondering where this sense of healing and your personal journey are coming in through this, particularly with the role of participating in Sansei Legacy Project. Did you have a chance to go through your own experience, your personal experiences through Sansei Legacy Project? Or was that really more of a vocational sort of experience for you?

02-01:31:51

Yoshii: It was both, it was a "both/and." Because I was in the role of convening, and then helping to organize things, there was that aspect where I was involved in the doing of the project, but I also participated where we had our own support groups that we set up, and I participated fully in those, and I learned a lot in what was going on in the project. And to me, again, it was a catalyst for my mother to tell the story that she told me in the early '90s. I would say that was a direct result of us having done the Sansei Legacy Project, and at that particular time really encouraging people and their families to have dialogue and have conversations. We were very much in that mode of things.

But I would say in terms of the longer trajectory of healing in my life, I would say it's centered on my vocation as a pastor. One of the things that became very clear to me over a period of time, as a pastor you're meeting with individuals for pastoral support and pastoral counsel, you're doing healing work in the congregation in many different dimensions and levels, and you have to deal with your own issues in order to be able to be a vehicle for healing for others. So that I had my own spiritual practice and my own ways of being in tune with myself, and also being in tune with things that may cause pain for me or trigger things. I became aware, I think, during Sansei Legacy Project that I carry trauma with me, and that I could walk into different spaces and be triggered, and I might be triggered by painful things of the past that became present in that room at that particular moment in time.

02-01:33:44

And so, I had to develop my own practice of monitoring myself because what I began to recognize is that a lot of times people are acting out their own pain in different spaces and causing more grief to other people, and that's not just

pastors, but it could be in any profession. People that are wounded carry their wounds with them into different spaces, and they can get triggered by different things, and then, boom, there's friction or tension that goes on between people. So, there's a difference—and this is where the theology comes into it, too, because for us, and for me as a pastor, there's a space and a time for what we call "righteous anger," which is the righteous anger of calling out prophetically things that we see that are not morally right or just. But there are also places where we can displace our anger and we may be causing more harm than help in the way we express our anger in different spaces. I don't know if that makes any sense.

02-01:34:52

Eardley-Pryor: It makes great sense. I'm wondering how you were able to carve this personal space out for your own healing and your own spiritual journey while also having this role as a community leader and as a pastor. So, how was it—

02-01:35:05

Yoshii: Well, because it's essential that, as a spiritual leader, you have to take care of yourself. We call it self-care. I think there's much more talk about it nowadays in seminary where they actually have courses where they're making sure people focus on their self-care. I think when I was in seminary, I don't remember there being as much focus on it. But during the trajectory of my tenure as pastor, it becomes clear that you have to take of yourself. And you have to take of yourself in ways are rooted in your spiritual practice. Your spiritual practice has to be attentive to your own needs, and your own emotional temperature, and what's going on psychically for yourself.

02-01:35:53

Eardley-Pryor: How did you do that? Where did you find that personal space?

02-01:35:57

Yoshii: I had a couple different ways that that would happen for me. It's in my prayer life, and I adopted the Jesus Prayer when I was in seminary as I was testing out different forms of prayer. As I mentioned to you before, I was exploring spirituality in different forms like chanting, and different kinds of chanting, song, music, ritual. But for me, I landed on something called the Jesus Prayer which actually comes from the Eastern Orthodox tradition. And it's a very simple prayer that you can say through different pauses in your breath. It's also called the breath prayer because you say the prayer as you breathe in and breathe out, and it's a prayer you can say anywhere. You can say the prayer while you're standing in line at the grocery store. And so, instead of getting agitated because the line is really long, you just say this prayer and it helps kind of ground yourself, and then also takes you back into your normal breathing pattern, and then also it grounds yourself in Christ because it's called the Jesus Prayer. And that, to me, was a daily practice, morning and evening, and the time that I also hold others in prayer.

02-01:37:26

So, when people are asking me to remember them in prayers, that would be the time that I would remember others in prayer. And as you share your prayers, you're giving them over to God so that you don't hold that in your own space, you're giving that over to God's healing as well. But that prayer I like because you can say it anywhere. You can say it during the day anywhere you are, so that if you find yourself being agitated about something or feeling off-kilter you can go back to the breath and then say the prayer.

The other way for me, physically, has been playing basketball, that's been my sport and exercise. And so, I have felt that that was something I enjoyed when I was younger. There was a period of time when I didn't play for different reasons, and I think I shared earlier in the interview about my trauma around that, when I couldn't play for a while. When I got older and my kids grew up a little bit more, I returned, and it took me a while to get back in shape. But it's kind of, to me, physical exercise is healing, and it's also healthy for you, and takes your mind off other things.

02-01:38:44

And then I also took up jogging. And when I jog now, I also share the breath prayer while I'm jogging. So, I share the prayer in my breath as I'm jogging, and there's a practice that we call it Ignatian prayer where you have intention. Usually it's Ignatian walking prayer, where you have an intention of saying a prayer, and you take your walk, and you meditate on that question that you have, and then you notice what's going on around you as you watch the environment to see responses to your prayer, and then you come back home. And coming back home is coming back to home base, so that as you start with the prayer, you notice what's coming into your sphere of life. And then back home, you're recentered and finding kind of what is the response to the question you had. I do that when I jog. So, I have a regular jogging pattern, but I'll say the breath prayer while I'm going. It's not the same as Ignatian prayer, but I'll say the breath prayer. But as I'm saying the breath prayer, I'm also noticing what's going on in the environment around me. So, it's very interesting. You could be jogging, and you see the stop sign, somehow you're focused on the stop sign, and you're getting a message about "stop." Or you could be jogging, and you hear the birds chirping, and the birds are singing to you something. Or you could be jogging, and the wind is blowing a certain way, and as you feel the wind blowing, it tells you something about—the wind is also a metaphor for the Holy Spirit, so the wind may be blowing this way rather than that way.

02-01:40:32

Eardley-Pryor: I love the way you take in your experiences in your environment, either the natural or the built environment, as a way for your spiritual practice and for being present. Would you feel comfortable sharing the words of the Jesus Prayer?

02-01:40:48
Yoshii: Sure.

"Lord Jesus Christ,
Son of God,
Have mercy on me,
for I am a sinner."

So, you'd say each phrase with the breath.

02-01:41:18
Eardley-Pryor: That's wonderful.

02-01:41:19
Yoshii: And sometimes it's nice to say it as slow as you can so that you can savor the breath and then pause for the intake. And also, the prayer can also be said in a modified way, because sometimes saying "I'm a sinner" kind of is a little bit—sometimes for some people that's a toxic word to use. Because sometimes they have grown up in environments where they've been scolded, "You're a sinner," and it's not a good feeling. And so, sometimes I encourage people, "Maybe omit that part. If it's not life giving, don't use it." And sometimes there's a space where people may be in—and I'd share this prayer with people in the hospital, for example. Maybe you just want to invoke Jesus' name: "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God," and then have a phrase in which is what you need in the moment. Like if you're really in a lot of pain, you might petition God to say, "Please relieve my pain." And so, that becomes the mantra and persons can say the breath prayer as they're trying to get through this painful situation of their illness, what have you.

02-01:42:50
Or someone may be dealing with relational issues, maybe, "Give us peace." So, it might be just three phrases of "Jesus Christ, Son of God, Give us peace," and just to repeat it. The other word, too, is the word "Lord" is offensive for many people. So, I'll encourage people, if that's offensive, don't use "Lord," just use something else. But the whole point of it, too, is that what I have found to be true is there's a real power in saying the name of Jesus and the phrase Christ. They're two different names, but there is a power, for me, at least, and this is what I share with others—I believe it can be a power for others, as well, to evoke the name. Because when we evoke those names, there's a different kind of healing element that comes into our space and that's what grounds us in our faith.

02-01:44:04
Eardley-Pryor: That's beautiful. Do you mind if we pause for a moment?

02-01:44:06
Yoshii: Sure.

02-01:44:07
Eardley-Pryor: Thank you.

[pause in recording]

02-01:44:10
Eardley-Pryor: Michael, I want to ask you about the ways in which your personal practice and your engagement in the Japanese American community became a broader outreach in your efforts in social justice, both locally in your community but also it expands to become much more of an international presence. How did you make this transition? Or how did you continue to evolve your own service and experience and self-identity as a Japanese American to the broader social justice sphere?

02-01:44:43
Yoshii: Right. Well, I would say it's circumstances that took place that led to sort of a transition and, particularly, the period there while I was doing the facilitation or convening for Sansei Legacy Project. And then as a congregation, we were looking at a lot of our own historical things, Day of Remembrances, and things within our congregation. There was some events in the community that began to explode, literally, in Alameda with the racial justice issues. One involved a situation with the school district with an Asian administrator, and it revealed the inequities of representation for Asians in the teaching ranks and administrative ranks. But there was also a scandal with the police in that same year. This was in, I believe, about 1991, and the police scandal was really focused and targeted at the Black community, but it was something that the whole community was really concerned about—including the ministerial association that I was on, they were concerned about what was going on around the racism issues. And this was before Rodney King, to place it in kind of sequence of time. And so, I think the challenge for us as a congregation is: do we want to be engaged in these issues? And I was being asked to get involved personally, but we had to talk about it as a congregation. And as it turned out, people were willing to be engaged.

02-01:46:10
So for me, individually as pastor, to carve out what role I would play with all of that, and also, how do we engage our congregation in that? We became part of the Community Developers Program in the Methodist church, which is the community development and community organizing arm of the church that started in 1968. And it started after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the General Conference of the United Methodist Church created a new program to help support local church-based organizing, particularly in the Black south in small churches. But that program evolved to support organizing in Latino churches, and Native American, and then Asian churches. And so, by this particular time, we were able to join that network and get some funding to hire a community organizer for the work there. I hesitate to go into details about all the stories because I think those ministries belong to the church, and I think it's a story for the church members to tell,

and for individuals there as well. And also, I don't want to leave anybody out, so I won't name any names. But suffice it to say, for me personally, it shifted my identity as a pastor into also a community organizer as well, a pastor-organizer. And I think I had some good gifts for being able to do that, having to balance the time that you spend because a lot of your time should be focused on pastoring your own members, and then venturing out to community things you have to spend a lot of time organizing and being a catalyst for the organizing that goes on.

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But it was also a great time for us to connect to the Community Developers network because they had a good theology as a foundation of their methodology for organizing out of the church that came out of basic principles about, what does it mean for church to engage in partnerships with people in the community in mutuality with one another? Not proselytizing, but forming partnerships with one another. That became a staple for the congregational organizing that we did for a period of time. And it became, for me, a way to step into that particular role where I'm seeing myself as somebody representing this local church, but at the same time I'm helping to invite people into partnerships with the congregation. So I'm kind of the bridge to the congregation, but I'm also kind of a bridge to the community, to community members. And then we start forming relationships. And then people who are in the community, they start forming relationships with members of the church. And in fact, some of them start coming to our church and become leaders in the congregation, which actually did happen, a great blessing that that kind of thing happened.

02-01:48:57

And we were organizing on different issues through the '90s, from the racial justice issues to housing issues. We got organized there and formed a housing advocacy group. We began to organize on LGBTQ rights in the community, and various issues that would come locally. I think we also began to, as a congregation, shift away from Japanese centric identity to a more Pan-Asian one. I think by the end of that decade, I think when we were celebrating our 100th anniversary, we were becoming more Pan-Asian, and that shifted my own sort of leadership profile as well—

02-01:49:40

Eardley-Pryor: In what way?

02-01:49:41

Yoshii: Well, being a Japanese American, and having served in a Japanese American congregation, and having been through this sort of real key period of the Civil Liberties Act being enacted, and focused on our own community—and now doing work to empower other communities and be present with other issues, we're bringing our historical narrative to those settings, and also pivoting on civil liberties for our own community to the rights of others, whether they be housing rights, or whether they be renters' rights, or the rights of Blacks in the

community, and so forth, or LGBTQ. We're translating our history into a living theology to do ministry for justice for others. And also, as the congregation was changing in its makeup, feeling kind of important that we don't highlight so much our Japanese American ethnocentricity in a congregation, but be inclusive for whoever is coming. So, we want to be attentive to different narratives whether people are coming from Southeast Asia, or from the Philippines, or from China or Hong Kong. Others have their own narratives, too, and you need to be sensitive to include that in the story. I don't know if I always did that well, but it certainly became a challenge for me in terms of leadership and also leadership with the congregation to make sure that we are doing that. But also starting to give focus to who we're in a relationship with out in the community, and then, by virtue of that, other people then beginning to become part of our community as well.

02-01:51:27

Eardley-Pryor: It's great to see your trajectory throughout your whole life, thinking about your work in the late '70s that was community organizing, community engagement. That then becomes a vocation where you're serving the Japanese American community and your congregation. And then in the '90s, it seems to really expand broader. So, taking that personal history, the community history, the congregational history, and then expanding it to these broader social justice issues. Seeing that evolution personally and collectively is really fascinating.

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Yoshii: And there's a dialectic there, too, how people perceive you in different spaces, and you perceive yourself. And so, there may be people that I'm meeting, that I meet anew, that they perceive me as the person who's doing work with the Black community in Alameda. Or they may perceive me as the housing rights activist. Or they may perceive me as the LGBTQ activist. I mean, there could be many perceptions of who you are, and I could embrace them all, but know at the core, I'm just a pastor doing my work [laughs] in this particular congregation. And I may have not chosen those particular things, but they came into the community in ways that we were engaging.

And the other thing, too, as a pastor, in terms of leadership, I'm always trying to be mindful that we work for the things that members want to see happen, or things that the members feel called for us to engage in. So that it's not me bringing the issues, it's the members. Because ultimately, it's the congregation that owns the ministry, which is why I say that's their story to tell, too. Because those who were involved in those particular issues will have their own story and the ways that things evolved. I have my own point of view [laughs] as a pastor who was in charge.

02-01:53:16

Eardley-Pryor: Yeah, that's great. It sounds like the '90s was this pivot point of broadening to broader issues. I want to ask about the 2000s. The beginning of the 2000s is a pivot point in a lot of ways, particularly for the United States, but I think

globally in some ways. That is 9/11, September 11th, can kind of be a trigger, or at least a focal point for thinking about that pivot. What are your memories of 9/11? And what came out of your experience from it?

02-01:53:45

Yoshii: Well, 9/11 was very distinct because I remember we were going through a renovation, so we weren't worshipping in the sanctuary, but in the social hall which is more the historic building which was built in 1926-1927, and had a lot of historical memory there. But we were worshipping there, and the first Sunday after 9/11 I had just an open conversation with people, like many Christians were doing, to just debrief what was happening. And one member really brought up his memories of Pearl Harbor, and how immediately the Nisei and the Issei were targeted as the enemy. And he was concerned about what's happening with Arabs, and Muslims, and South Asians because he knew that they would be a targeted enemy that could be vulnerable in the American context. And so, he turned our attention toward that. And I think the next week I invited an Imam to come speak to us. And then we began working with the local Afghan community, because the military conflict was going on in Afghanistan, and we started to do some work with the Afghani community to help send some things there to people during the holidays. But it really then opened up more work with other Muslims, particularly Muslim organizations that were monitoring things. And the parallel was that the FBI was coming at the Muslim communities at this particular time doing surveillance and monitoring things.

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That happened with Japanese Americans, too, and that happened at the church that I served in, and probably other Japanese American congregations. And so, there's a parallel in there where our story was similar to theirs. And this is a particular case in point where many of us who had been involved in testifying in the hearings and celebrated the Civil Liberties Act being passed kind of knew that there would be a time where the Civil Liberties Act would be important for other communities. It's not just about ourselves, but it's going to be a principle for others. And I think that really came home in 9/11 because Japanese Americans in many different places were beginning to become activated around remembering their own story for the benefit of others who were being targeted.

02-01:55:57

Eardley-Pryor: With the rise of what the United States government called the "War on Terror" and the eventual invasion of Iraq in 2003, I know the Bay Area had a very large anti-war presence. I'm wondering about your experience in the rise up to the invasion of Iraq, and then the eventual conflict there.

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Yoshii: Yeah, that was a topic of discussion in our congregation. I think the War on Terrorism, there's a whole narrative that goes behind it, and I think what we knew—and this is again drawing on the Japanese American experience and

Civil Liberties Act was that there are multiple narratives wherever you go, and we clearly had a different narrative of World War II. And so, there were different narratives that need to be heard around what's going on with the War on Terrorism, and there are caveats around how such a war gets implemented when it's very ambiguous: what is this War on Terrorism? And I clearly saw that, and particularly through our resources of the global church who were giving us information about things that were taking place, that the pivot to Iraq was just unjustified in terms of so-called War on Terrorism. And we talked about it a lot within our social justice committee in our church. And there were leaders who were very clear on it, too, that this whole notion of weapons of mass destruction and going after Saddam Hussein, however nefarious people felt about Saddam Hussein, they didn't have anything to do with the 9/11 attacks, and that there was a shift taking place and it had to with more geo-politics than actually what happened with 9/11.

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And that was a very challenging period though, and so our congregation was very involved in the—not going into Iraq, the protests that were going on at the particular time in the Bay Area. Unfortunately, the pivot to Iraq did take place, and once went in, it happened, and there was a lot of collateral damage. I think it was the first time I heard that phrase "collateral damage" to the victims of a war and the violence that went on.

There was a period there where I got personally involved, and I think with the congregation's blessings, in the campaign of Lieutenant [Ehren Keoni] Watada, who was the lieutenant in the military who refused to go to Iraq because he felt it was not justified, our entry into Iraq. And we were part of an Asian American for Social Justice committee that had a Bay Area organizing for the support for Lieutenant Watada. And because he was Japanese American, that narrative of Japanese Americans was also prominent in that campaign as well.

02-01:58:44

Eardley-Pryor: What came out of that campaign?

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Yoshii: He didn't go, and he was able to be released from his duty, and he went on to do some other things personally. He didn't want to be political about it, he was just taking a personal stand as an individual.

02-01:59:05

Eardley-Pryor: Your engagement in the Muslim American and the Arab community in the United States, how did that then evolve for you in your work towards social justice and for human rights?

02-01:59:18

Yoshii: Well, I was working with different organizations, and there was a lot of deportations going on at that particular time, and so there were a lot of rallies

and protests at INS [Immigration and Naturalization Service] in San Francisco. [In 2003, INS was replaced with Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), Customs and Border Protection (CBP), and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS).] And I'd be asked to come and provide witness and speak out there periodically. And so, it was pretty intense there for a period of time in terms of trying to stave off deportations that were taking place.

02-01:59:49

Eardley-Pryor: I have a note that you shared that in the mid-2000s, around 2006, you had a trip to Palestine. What was that experience? What brought you there and what came from it?

02-02:00:00

Yoshii: A friend of mine had been going to Palestine for many years, and he was inviting me, and that particular year there was—our liaison for the Methodist Church who had served there for ten years was wrapping up her time, and she wanted to bring Methodists from across the denomination to be with her for a conference. And she was organizing folks to go back and begin education and programs around—particularly focus around Palestinian rights, Palestinian human rights. So, she brought folks together and I was one of maybe two others from our conference in California that attended. There were people from about nine or ten other conferences across the country who attended, and we were based in Bethlehem for the conference, and toured the region, and had many speakers come for the visit. And then we came back and I organized with my friend a task force in the Cal-Nevada conference for Israel-Palestine issues. And then it was not active in our congregation so much, we were focused more on Philippine human rights at that particular time. I was also involved in convening of a Philippine human rights task force for the conference, and had taken a trip to the Philippines, had organized a trip to the Philippines with our bishop and leaders of our conference in partnership with a group called National Council of Churches in the Philippines around that same time, same period. And so, we started these two task forces at the same period.

02-02:01:45

Eardley-Pryor: With the trip that was to Palestine and this experience in Bethlehem, had you ever been to what's called the Holy Land?

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Yoshii: I had never been there. No, I had never been there, and I had not really had a strong interest in going. I kind of viewed it more kind of maybe as some clergy do as not relevant to my own ministry, per se. And, boy, was I wrong about that, because visiting there, both in terms of looking at Holy Land sites and understanding the biblical terrain and so forth—so much that I had been missing being, and learning about. At the same time, looking at the issue of Israel and Palestine as a key thing that is happening there in that region that really needs to have the world's attention.

02-02:02:46

Eardley-Pryor: What came out of the experience, when you came back and organized some of the task forces around these human rights issues on either the Philippines or Israeli-Palestine issues?

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Yoshii: For the Philippines human rights work, we organized a task force in which we committed to taking people there each year, and then being in solidarity with folks who were struggling with their human rights issues that were taking place. At that particular time, there was a particular emphasis on extrajudicial killings that were taking place, and Methodist clergy were among those who were being targeted. And so, they were amongst the fisher folks, and journalists, and community organizers, farmers—who had been organizing for human rights who were subjected to targeting there. Our task force was created to have an ongoing relationship once we had our initial exposure trip and began to organize the task force.

A similar thing was happening with the Palestine-Israel task force was that the purpose was to organize education, and to be in solidarity with the Palestinians, and to educate on the Israel-Palestine issue because there was a clear understanding that Americans were not getting the true narrative of what was really taking place there. And most tours to the Holy Land are only given the Israeli narrative which skews the real history of what's taken place to the Palestinians from what they call the Nakba, the "catastrophe" in 1948 over their displacement from communities, to even what's happened with the occupation in 1967, and living under military occupation.

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So, that committee was doing a lot of education work. I wasn't really involved too much once we started the task force. I mean, I was a member of the committee, but not as much as I was involved in the Philippines task force, until one of our members had kind of a revelation for the congregation to be involved in ministry with Palestinians. He was very clear that it was *with* Palestinians, not for Palestinians. And it's not about Israelis and Palestinians, it was to be with Palestinians, much like we would do ministry with immigrant populations, or do ministry with renters community. The mutuality was to be emphasized, and that's where the congregation engaged in some process of discernment around that. And then there was a time in which we had the liaison to Palestine come out in consultation, and had a meeting with her to determine how this ministry with Palestinians could play out. And she recommended doing a partnership with the obscure village in the Bethlehem district called Wadi Foquin, which we started in 2009. And so, that caused me to shift some of my focus on the Philippine human rights issues to that because, of course, the congregation was taking that up, and began that partnership with some other congregations.

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And really a whole new period of ministry for myself. And as we began to commit to taking trips every year to the region, I was helping organize some of those trips for the first four or five years or so. And each trip was a revelation to me of new learnings about the biblical terrain, and also about the partnership that we were in with this particular village [Wadi Foquin], and the Palestinian situation. And it really deepened in, I would say, in 2014. That year, the sheik of the village, his name was Yusef Manasra—when I arrived at his son's home, he took off his cloak and put it on me, and his headdress and he put it on me. And I'll tell you, it was just such an amazing experience. It was almost like my ordination when the bishop laid her hands on me and said a prayer. And I was really befuddled for some time trying to make sense of what he had just done, but the family kind of told me, "You know, this is kind of really bonding our relationship together, and kind of the trust that he was bestowing upon me, and the work that we were doing together." Unfortunately, he passed away in 2017. It was the same year my mother passed away. And it was just so very interesting because I feel like this connection to his spirit. And the family and folks in the village have told us also about how much they revere his legacy as the sheik of the village and how he helped them survive.

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And I really feel like there was this deeper calling for me spiritually, that there's a long-term commitment that I'm making to the folks there. When we moved on as a congregation to do more work with immigrant communities in 2015-2016 or so, we were still doing our Wadi Foquin partnership. But my focus had to be on the immigration ministry at that particular point in time, and it was less focused with the partnership, but to give attention to the ministry that our congregation was focused on. What was clear to me as I went into retirement in 2020, I took a break from everything for a half a year, I came back to the Friends of Wadi Foquin, and I now co-chair that with another retired pastor. And I feel like that loop has circled where Yusef gave me his robe, I always feel his robe around me in many ways—much like I feel my grandparents kind of over my shoulder and on my photo backdrop screen [here on Zoom] because they're in the picture, it's where they are in the cemetery.

02-02:09:01

Eardley-Pryor: In what ways did you bring your ethnic identity as a Japanese American to the work with Wadi Foquin and Palestine?

02-02:09:09

Yoshii: It's interesting because Palestine got introduced to us as a congregation in 2000 by an intern who had spent time in Gaza. And we did some studies on the Japanese American narrative and the Palestinian narrative back in 2000 or so, I think. And we were going to start doing some things with Palestine, but it got disrupted by 9/11. But we had done that study, and I think for me at that particular time it was a good way to kind of consciously think about the

comparisons in our narratives. But I sort of resisted thinking about this partnership with the village being initiated because of the Japanese American elements of things.

But I do know that over a period of time, there are things that have evolved where our Japanese American—my own Japanese American heritage, there are connecting points with Palestinians. One point in case, for example, it's like when we started doing work with Palestinian community here in the Bay Area. There was a member of our church who was part Palestinian and Filipino, she initiated a story project in which we were doing interviews with Palestinians in the Bay Area. And I began to see how the Palestinian communities here were similar to Japanese Americans because they have their own subcultures, they have their own things going on with their churches or with their mosques, and their own kind of extended family relationships that was just very reminiscent for me of growing up as Japanese American, where it's sort of under the radar screen of other people's view, other people don't know what that's like. And they have their own stores, and their businesses and things where they know where to frequent with each other. And so, that was kind of a familiarity.

02-02:11:01

And then, also, the reality of their narrative being suppressed. That was something that really hearkened back for me back when we were starting with the Redress Movement, and even trying to tell our stories. I remember being on a radio show, I think I was being interviewed or facilitating something on the radio in the Bay Area back in the early '80s, and people were coming on the show saying, "Oh, what you're talking about never happened to your people." And I was like, "How can you say that? How can you tell me this never happened to my family?" And that's like what I see is happening to Palestinians is that there are people saying, "Oh, what you're saying is not true. There were no Palestinians there, and what you're saying is not true. You're making it up," and all these kinds of things. So, the historical suppression. And then just sort of the living with the oppression. Of course, to me, the Palestinian situation is no comparison to what Japanese Americans went through, it's a much more huge problem. And it's still going on, which is why I think it's a very much the world's unfinished business right now.

02-02:12:11

Eardley-Pryor: I had a note here that you shared, how around the time when the engagement with Wadi Foquin emerged was also around the time you had a heart attack.

02-02:12:20

Yoshii: That's right, yeah.

02-02:12:21

Eardley-Pryor: I want to ask you about what that experience, that brush with death, was like, and what you took from that experience.

02-02:12:28

Yoshii: Well, it was 2008, I remember vividly. It was two days after Obama got elected. So, it was that week of the election, and I was actually playing basketball with some young guys. I usually play with some older guys, and we play two games and we rest. And that particular night, the gym was closed where I usually play, and I was leaving the place, I ran into a friend of my daughters. He said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I was going to play basketball here, but our gym is closed." He said, "Well, we have the gym open at Alameda Point, why don't you come play with us?" These guys were in their late twenties, I think, early thirties. And I played really hard. I was fifty-six at the time, but we kept winning, and so we played five games. I don't remember actually what actually happened, but the story that I've been told was I got up for a sixth game, then I ran up and down the court a couple of times. And then I stopped in the mid-court and said, "I think I'm done for the night, guys," and I collapsed, and I went unconscious. And the woman on duty at the recreational department made a call right away to emergency, and then she came out and administered CPR. And two guys jumped on, one mouth to mouth and one on chest compression, right away. It was the first time that she had done this. Apparently, she had taught it, but never administered it for twenty something years.

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And then the ambulance came, the fire trucks came, they got the defibrillator on me. I was told later that my heart stopped for five minutes, but they got me in the ambulance, got me going, and they got on the line with the cardiologist at Summit Hospital in Oakland. He said, "Bring him over directly to save time." And so, he worked on me. It was only one artery that was damaged, and he put a stent in it, and woke me up in the morning and told me what had happened. It was funny because he said, "Do you believe in God?" And I said, "I hope so. I'm a pastor," and he started laughing. And he said I could've been a dead man or been very damaged brain-wise, but everything fell into place for me and that my life was spared. He said he was going to write up the case in a journal as how everything needs to come together in order for someone to be saved like this, because this doesn't always happen. The paramedics told me, too, they were so happy to hear that I survived because, in their case, they don't always see people survive. And my family thought I was hallucinating, because I kept telling them I hit the three point shot to win the game and that's when it happened. But then, that was really true because one of the young guys who came and visited me. He said that was true, I did hit a winning three pointer. [laughs] But what wasn't true was I thought I had left the gym on my own and had driven home, but that was a tape in my mind that somewhere my brain was making that up or something.

02-02:15:46

But while I was there, also, this was the year we had been talking about doing the ministry of Palestine. And I kind of woke up in the hospital bed one morning saying, "We got to jump on that ministry. We've been waiting too long." And it was clear to me something had registered for me, because I had

been saved, there was more to do, and that I may have been delaying in getting that thing going, too, but that we really needed to do this. Because they'd been issuing a 911 call to us, we'd not been responding. And I think it was a profound thing that I felt that everybody responded for my life to be saved, that we owe it to the Palestinians to respond to the 911 call that they're issuing. And so, my family was very upset with me because, of course, they thought I needed to take rest and stop doing a lot of things, and we had to kind of work through that. We started our trips the next year after that. And each one of my family members came on the first three trips we had, one after another. But they weren't coming because they were interested, they were coming to monitor me [laughs].

02-02:17:07

I think they were more traumatized by my heart attack than I was. I was not traumatized at all, I didn't have any trauma around it at all. And I kept waiting for something to drop, like I'm going to go into some deep depression or something, but it never happened. I kind of got energized, and we got moving on that ministry. But—yeah. But I know they still carry trauma around that because they didn't know if I was going to make it, and my daughters flew in from LA and New York, and Suzanne was just vigilant there. So, it's something we talk about all the time, like I had no trauma, but they did. And I don't know.

02-02:17:52

Eardley-Pryor: It says something that you, even after retirement, continue this partnership with the Palestinian work, that it was that meaningful for you, that it was a new form of life in some ways.

02-02:18:07

Yoshii: It's interesting because a Palestinian friend just recently passed away, and it was interesting because at the funeral, there was a meal afterwards, and I was there at the table with the family members. And then I was introduced to one of the family members, and the person who introduced me mentioned that I'm Japanese American, and that I had done a lot of work in the community, and supported Palestinians a lot. And then he turned to me and he says, "Why is that Japanese Americans don't know the Palestinian story?" And I said, "What do you mean?" And he said, "I have Japanese American friends, I know about their story. But they don't know about my story." And I said [laughs], "That's an interesting question." I told him, "I'd imagine most don't know because, like most Americans, most Americans don't know the real story about what's going on with Palestinians."

02-02:18:59

Eardley-Pryor: I want to move us towards a conclusion, and you mentioned retirement in 2020. I want to ask about that experience, and 2020 itself is also such a pivot point. I mean, with the rise of the global pandemic, the final end of the Trump administration, and the end of your work as the head of the Buena Vista

United Methodist Church. Share with me what that moment meant for you, and why at that time?

02-02:19:25

Yoshii: Well, as an itinerant pastor, we are actually serving year to year anyway, as we're subjected to being appointed by our bishop. We agree we'll serve wherever we are assigned to according to the itinerant system. So, even though I served there for thirty-two years at Buena Vista, it was year by year. I mean, we were always aware that any year could be my last year, and I could be asked to go somewhere else. Bishops were much more consultative in my early years. And I had superintendents who were very enthused about the organizing work that we were doing, and they weren't in a hurry to move me somewhere else, and said, "Do that work that you're doing." But I knew time would come where either I would move somewhere else or I would retire. And in my case, I was planning for retirement at Buena Vista when I was seventy-two, which would have been two years from now. But as I had a grandson, and I had a conversation with my daughter, and she said—and I was having such a good time babysitting him, she said, "You know it would be great if you retired early, you could spend more time with him." And I thought about that. Because in ministry, your family gets neglected a lot because you're spending so much time with so many other things. And I kind of felt that that would be a good thing to spend time with him because I won't get it back later on.

And also, I felt it was a good time to change because I felt the congregation was really in a good place. We had really great members, good leaders, and that there would be a time I'm going to have to leave anyway. And this seemed like a good pivot point for the congregation and a time for new leadership for them, too. And so, that was part of the equation. I knew I would still probably do things in post-retirement, because most clergy still stay active with one thing or another, I just didn't know what it would be. But that was kind of the precipitating kind of events. And I think we had come off of a great anniversary celebration in 2018, as well. And, like I mentioned, the youth had that trip to Topaz that I was able to accompany them on. And there was just some nice things happening that it made sort of a pivot to retirement feel like a good time for me to do that. And so, we went ahead and began planning it in late 2019.

02-02:21:51

Eardley-Pryor: As a way to help conclude your oral history, I want to ask you as a final question: what are your thoughts about the future—your hopes for yourself, and your hopes for what's to come?

02-02:22:12

Yoshii: I think now that I'm retired, I have the space to be open to whatever may come, and I'm open for that. I spent the good first year kind of doing a lot of babysitting for my grandson, and then he started in preschool. And there may be others along the way [laughs], who knows kind of how family life will

expand, or change, or what have you. So, I think it's just a good time to be open to whatever is in store for us. I do preaching at other places, and I've been asked to preach different places here and there, and to be involved in different things. I've done some things like with the Black reparations, there was a call for Japanese Americans to submit testimony on why they should go forward with Black reparations, and I was kind of part of that. I think 100 people sent in letters and our own point of view as Japanese Americans. I continue to co-chair Friends of Wadi Foquin, and we'll take a trip coming up soon in October to the region. And kind of have our vacation trips and things of that nature. But there's always—I'm very busy still, and always things going on. Just kind of open is—I think my faith is still strong, I'll put it that way. I'm not retiring in a place of being burned out. I feel like I'm retiring in a good space of kind of healthy spirituality, so continue to work on.

02-02:23:47

I should mention, too, we also had a chance to honor Suzanne's family because her mother was a Hibakusha, Hiroshima bomb survivor. So, the last couple years we've been able to as family participate in the Hiroshima Nagasaki commemorations in the Bay Area, which we hadn't done before because we just didn't have as much time for us all to get together on that. That's been nice, kind of thing for us to do.

02-02:24:14

Eardley-Pryor: In speaking about being open for what life still has in store for you, I want to thank you for being so open in sharing your life story here as a part of your oral history.

02-02:24:25

Yoshii: Could I just say a word of thanks as we're closing?

02-02:24:28

Eardley-Pryor: Please.

02-02:24:29

Yoshii: I want to say a word of thanks particularly to the congregation of Buena Vista because that was the period I think I spent most of my years in active ministry. And I've been intentional about not telling their story of ministry because I think it's their story to tell, for individuals there to tell their story because it's their ministry. But it's been my intersection of being the pastor there that I've gone through the shifts, and changes, and kind of evolution of my own sensibility of identity as a Japanese American, as well as a community leader, and as a Christian clergy. And so, I really have been blessed by those relationships, and being part of serving that congregation. And it's shaped who I have become, I believe, because if I had been somewhere else, my life would have been very different. If I had moved around several times, my whole story would be a lot different, that's for sure.

02-02:25:29
Eardley-Pryor: I think the community would probably say that they've been blessed to have you be a part of it.

02-02:25:34
Yoshii: I hope so.

02-02:25:36
Eardley-Pryor: I do want to ask—there's one more thing. There's a story that I'm interested in hearing you share as a reflection. You've earned a number of awards, rightfully so, with your engagement in your work, and you had shared with me that upon receiving one of these awards, whether it was a UC Berkeley Distinguished Alumni Award or from Koshland Awards for your engagement in Alameda, that there was a dream that came to you. What was that story?

02-02:26:07
Yoshii: I was part of the Koshland Awardees, but also, at the Pacific School of Religion where I went to seminary I was awarded with the Distinguished Alumni Award. And the dream I had was connected to receiving that award because I saw my grandparents sitting in these high back chairs with purple color, which is kind of a royal color, of esteem spiritually as well. And their faces were glowing, and they didn't say anything, but I could just feel them being proud of me, and I could feel their blessing coming forward. And I think that was also a pivot, in the maybe early 2000s or so, where I really started to feel their presence on my shoulders. Every time I was doing anything new, I would look to them for blessings and guidance. And it was something interesting that many families in Buena Vista, their Japanese American sensibility was really being connected to their ancestors. And it was part of the spirituality, which I found to be very distinct from, say, other communities, per say. But anyway, I think that was something that was very formative for me. And so, I still hold them close to me in my spirituality, but also kind of just in my life in general. And that's why I have [here on Zoom] this photo backdrop from the cemetery where they're buried. My father's parents are also buried there, too, so, I have them with me, but in a different way. Because I think my mom's parents, I feel much more connected to them in my spiritual vocation. [In retirement I was asked to return to Pacific School of Religion to work part time to support United Methodist students there. I hesitated to say yes, at first, but eventually agreed. This has been a good opportunity to reflect on my own "calling" to ministry while supporting those who are experiencing their own calling today.]

02-02:27:54
Eardley-Pryor: Is there anything else you want to share at the conclusion here of your oral history?

02-02:27:57
Yoshii: No, I think I'm tapped out for today. [laughs] But I want to give thanks to you, also, Roger, for your time, your patience with me in this process, and just the

way you've kind of facilitated the whole process and the interview as well. I appreciate it.

02-02:28:16
Eardley-Pryor: Thank you. It's been a blessing.

02-02:28:18
Yoshii: I appreciate your work.

02-02:28:18
Eardley-Pryor: Thank you. I appreciate you being a part of this, and for sharing it with me. It's been an honor. All right. Well, thank you.

02-02:28:29
Yoshii: Okay.

[End of Interview]

Appendix: Photos courtesy of Rev. Michael Yoshii

Yukiko Sakamoto, the maternal grandmother of Michael Yoshii, in the back row on the far left, with other incarcerated Japanese Americans in front of the Office of Community Christian Church at the Jerome Detention Center in Arkansas, circa 1944.

Maternal family of Michael Yoshii in Chicago, circa 1945, following the family's release from Jerome, Arkansas. Front row from left to right: Yukiko Sakamoto; Kamezuchi Sakamoto; Henry Sakamoto (oldest son). Back row from left to right: Marion Sakamoto (youngest daughter); Roy Nagatani (husband to Hisayo); Hisayo (Sakamoto) Nagatani (eldest daughter); Lily (Sakamoto) Yoshii.

Funeral of Seisuke Yoshii, paternal grandfather of Michael Yoshii, in Berkeley, California, 1958. A young Michael Yoshii stands at the front right corner of the coffin in front of his brother Ken Yoshii. On the opposite corner of the coffin stands Laura Yoshii in front of her sister Karen Yoshii, cousins to Michael Yoshii and the children of Kiyoshi and Midori Yoshii. In the center behind the flowers stands Kiyoshi Yoshii, uncle to Michael Yoshii. To his left is Midori Yoshii, wife to Kiyoshi and aunt to Michael Yoshii. Wearing a black hat to the right of her son Kiyoshi stands Misao Yoshii, newly widowed and paternal grandmother to Michael Yoshii. To her right, wearing a gray suit and tie stands her son Tadashi Yoshii, the father of Michael Yoshii. To his right stands Lily Yoshii, wife of Tadashi and mother of Michael Yoshii. To her right, wearing a black hat, stands Lily's mother Yukiko Sakamoto, the maternal grandmother of Michael Yoshii.

Michael Yoshii delivering his redress testimony about the spiritual impact of Japanese American incarceration during World War II before the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC) in San Francisco, August 1981.

Suzanne (Niki) Yoshii and Michael Yoshii with their daughters, Sachi (left) and Michi (right), in Berkeley, California, 1985.

Michael Yoshii, on the far right side in the second row down from the top,
at his graduation from the Pacific School of Religion in Berkeley, California, 1986.

Members of the Buena Vista United Methodist Church in Alameda, California, celebrated the congregation's 95th anniversary on October 24, 1993. Rev. Michael Yoshii wears a white robe and sits toward the middle in the second row from the bottom. His younger daughter, Michi, sits directly in front him. His older daughter, Sachi, is two persons to the left of Michi. His wife, Suzanne is seated directly behind Sachi.

Celebrating Lily and Tadashi Yoshii's 50th wedding anniversary in Honolulu, Hawaii in 1998. Front row from left to right: Lily and Tadashi Yoshii (Michael's parents, seated); Allison Yoshii (Michael's niece, kneeling). Back row from left to right: Sachi Yoshii (Michael's oldest daughter); Carolyn and Ken Yoshii (Michael's older brother, Carolyn is now deceased); Michi Yoshii (Michael's younger daughter); Suzanne and Michael Yoshii; Steve and Jim Yoshii (Michael's nephews); Judy and Jaime Fukumae (Michael's younger sister), holding their son Jared Fukumae.

Michael Yoshii and family celebrating his 70th birthday in August 2022.
From left to right: Eric Fuller (Sachi's husband); Sachi Yoshii; Suzanne Yoshii; Michael Yoshii; Michi Yoshii; Kiyoshi Michael Nguyen (on lap); Binh Nguyen (Michi's husband).

Rev. Michael Yoshii invites survivors, descendants, and other participants to walk with intentional mindfulness to the site where James Hatsuaki Wakasa was murdered by a US soldier in Topaz Detention Camp in April 1943. In April 2023, eighty years after Wakasa's death, Rev. Yoshii and others participated in a memorial ceremony for James Wakasa and other Japanese Americans who died at Topaz. Photograph by Kristine C. Weller.