

I like stories. I like reading them and I like sharing them. So I am going to share with you the story of a trip I recently went on. It's my story, interwoven with snippets of the stories of those I met on the way, and it's a story I tell from my perspective, with my thoughts and reflections, in the hopes that as I tell this story you will see and understand things as I saw them, and so be willing to join me on my journey as it continues over the course of the year.

"O the bliss of one who identifies with and assists others in need- who gets inside their skin so completely he sees with their eyes and thinks with their thoughts and feels with their feelings. The one who does that will find that others do the same for him when he is in need."

Charles R. Swindoll

Prelude

I begin this story from July 1905 with the Katsura-Taft secret agreement in which Japan approves of America colonizing Philippine, and America consents to Japan colonising Chosun.

-1910: Japan makes Korea a formal colony, and carries out genocide against those who were involved in the independence movement.

- August 1945: atomic bombs are dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The Japanese offer surrender in World War II. Russian troops enter Korea.

- November 1947: UN passes resolution calling for elections in South Korea. The hope of reunification which the Koreans want is ignored.

-1948: In North Korea, Democratic People's Republic of Korea (PRK) proclaimed. Those who desperately want reunification fight back, leading to the people's resistance on the 3rd of April in Jeju Island.

Modern day

And so on the 16 May 2016 I arrived on Jeju Island, Korea, with these events in mind, hoping to better appreciate the reality of the armistice situation in the Korean peninsula and the urgent need for a Korea peace treaty.

My Story:

17 May

The first place we visited was the Gangjeong Village Peace Centre. The government had recently built a naval base near the village, and as we entered the first thing I noticed were the signs below.



I must admit that at first I was baffled. For some, a naval base may be interpreted as a sign of security. In Jeju however, an island which has experienced so much death and bloodshed, it was seen as yet another perpetuation of the military culture that so influences

Korean society.



The Gangjeong Village Peace Centre was built just before the completion of the naval base and it is hoped that the peace centre can be used to make people aware of the real value of peace, which they believe cannot come to pass while military weapons are still in use.

Dedicated protestors have held daily masses in the street for the past 5 years, followed by dances of peace and solidarity. As we joined in the dance we were aware of a group of men in dark suits and sunglasses standing on the

periphery videoing the proceedings. We were informed that they were police officers and that they had used the footage in the past to arrest some people, and to deny others entry to the country. Despite this, we danced on. This was the first of many examples of the Korean people's dedication to peace.

It was later that day, when we moved on to the 4.3 Peace Park, a modern saucer shaped building set in idyllic surroundings, but depicting a violent and bloody past, that the true realization of the necessity for a Korea Peace Treaty sank in. The 4.3 Peace Park commemorates the Jeju uprising on the 3rd of April 1948. We walked down corridor after corridor highlighting the history of this “Island of death”, where, decades later, bodies are still being



Jeju 4.3 Peace Park



19 May

The morning commenced with an opening service for peace and reunification during which I led the prayers for peace. The service took place in three languages: English, Korean and German, with amazing traditional Korean drumming.

This was followed by a series of seminars, including a fascinating lecture by Rev Kurt Esslinger, during which he spoke of the danger of a single story.



Names of hundreds of thousands of victims at 4.3 Peace Park

“The situation for reunification in Korea is no longer hopeful,” is how Dr Noh Jong Sun commenced his lecture. Certainly a good way of capturing our attention! When I later posed the question of where that leaves Korea, what his thoughts are for the future, and what our response should be, the answer was that it benefits the US, Japan, China and international governments to have a divided peninsula, therefore realistically the situation is not hopeful. “What is hopeful are the people. The people seek peace and reunification.”

We closed the day with a lively debate on gender and the mainstreaming of women, followed by an eye-opening conversation with Unzu Lee, one of the representatives who is of South Korean origin, but who was there as the representative from the Presbyterian Church USA, who helped me further understand the role gender perception/ gender biases play in peacebuilding. Much food for thought and cause for prayer.

20 May

This was one of the days that really stood out for me. After a three hour car journey we arrived at the ex- North Korean Labour party office building. North Korea ruled the area for five years. The building was so notorious that people used to say, "Anyone who goes in there never comes out intact".

Outside the building we met two Japanese monks who go there every day to chant for peace and justice. The shorter one of the monks (pictured) is a 38 year old woman who was born in North Korea. During her childhood she had very bad experiences there and so was filled with anger and hatred towards North Korea. She says all those feelings disappeared when she started chanting with the Myohoji group.



We then headed to Mt. Soi, which is situated near the DMZ (De-Militarized Zone) in Cheorwon, and which was closed to the public until 2011 as it was a military base. It is now an area of pilgrimage. Students of the Border Peace School walk up it every day at 3pm praying for Korea. One such student is Andrea, who lived in Seoul before studying at the Border Peace School. "In Seoul you can't always tell we're divided." She says. "But living near the border and seeing the tanks pass by each day, you can really tell."



Andrea and I near the peace observatory, Cheorwon



Japanese monks chanting in front of ex- North Korean labour party building

We walked up Mt. Soi in silence, praying for Korea, peace and reconciliation. The climb was no joke! Although just a hill, it was a steep climb. Once we got to the top however, we were rewarded with great views, a glimpse of the DMZ, of North Korea and of the North Korean military observatory situated in the

distant mountains.

In the afternoon we visited the DMZ in Cheorwon (which was one of the bloodiest places during the Korean War) and the Border Peace School. For me, my experience at the DMZ embodies my whole experience in South Korea. It was very odd to arrive at such a militarized and controlled area, and yet be continually told it was “de-militarized”. Stranger yet was to enter and be confronted with an eerily “peaceful” area of natural beauty and wildlife, and to watch a carefully contrived, highly biased propaganda video explaining the history of the conflict between South and North Korea. As Dr. Jung Ji- Seok, the director of the Border Peace School later stated, "military and peace don't really go together", and yet, it is such a dichotomy that exists in the DMZ in Cheorwon.

I found this to embody my experience in South Korea as a whole because in the same way you enter the De-Militarized Zone and are faced with peace and quiet and an area of natural beauty and wildlife, in the same way, as you first arrive in South Korea everything seems peaceful, prosperous, and normal. And yet as you dig deeper you start to see evidence of how deeply war can affect a country. This is true of even the younger generation who have never experienced war, but who live in a delicate political state that can only be described as the absence of war. But an absence of war isn't enough. The yearning for peace- real peace- and reconciliation is something that manifested itself over again during our time in Korea.

21 May

Our session with Dr David Suh Kwang- Sun was another memorable moment. He shared his personal story of growing up in Korea first under Japanese colonization and then Russian rule, and then during the Korean war. Tears were shed around the room as he described how his brother fought in the war on his behalf- he never saw him again- and how he pulled his father's body out of a river after he and four other ministers were shot dead by the military. He recalled how, as he looked at his father's body full of bullet holes, and wiped the blood off his face, all his thoughts were thoughts of vengeance. He concluded his talk with the words "Peace and unification is the younger generation's work, because our generation is one with too much hate and anger and blood on our hands."



Dr David Suh Kwang- Sun sharing his testimony

He explained how some people think that if North Korea collapses then South Korea can take over, but that in reality what is likely to happen is further division. China and Russia will come down (to take control of North Korea) and Japan and the US will come up (into South Korea).

If it wasn't already evident why peace and reconciliation in Korea is necessary, this session made it painfully clear.

We concluded our Saturday by breaking up into smaller regional groups in order to discuss strategies for how we could raise awareness of the Korea Peace Treaty campaign upon our return. The Europeans decided on a Social Media concerted campaign strategy.

22 May

The attendees of the peace treaty campaign attended different services according to their denominations. Daniel Kees, the UMC representative, and I worshipped at Good Meeting Methodist Church where we received a very warm welcome and had stimulating conversations with members of the congregation over lunch. I was expecting a very traditional, possibly high-Anglican type church and so was pleasantly surprised to enter a small but assuredly Methodist Church which was surprisingly liberal.



Good meeting Methodist Church



With members of Good Meeting Methodist church



We then re-grouped at Seoul Cathedral, Anglican Church of Korea, where we joined representatives from around Korea, the Philippines, Germany, the USA, Canada, Japan and more, for Asia Sunday 2016.

Conclusion

As abovementioned, during the workshop we attended a thought-provoking lecture by Rev Kurt Esslinger, during which he spoke of the danger of a single story. And yet we often only ever hear one story from the media when it comes to Korea. A story in which South and North Koreans continue to be at war, and where North Korea is often demonised. I now know that this is not the only story.

You have just finished reading my account of my time in Korea, but this too is not the only story. The story I have just shared includes snippets of the many stories I heard whilst in Korea. Stories which have changed me, and which will stay with me for the rest of my life. It is imperative that we continue listening to such stories, and sharing them, and hopefully one day they will form part of a bigger story of how the Korean peninsula came to be unified once more, and to finally know the true meaning of peace.

How can I get involved?

- Act by signing the petition for a Korean Peace Treaty <https://www.change.org/p/barack-obama-usa-sign-a-korean-peace-treaty-now>
- Like The Global Campaign for a Korea Peace Treaty-NCCK on Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/koreapeacetreaty/?pnref=story>
- Share your own stories and reflections of peace and reconciliation on the Korean Peninsula on social media using #KoreaPeaceTreaty
- Stay up to date on how the Methodist Church in Britain is involved <http://methodist.org.uk/mission/world-church/asia-pacific/korea>